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Disembedded religion and the infinity of references

Violated sentiments and threatened identities

Monika Wohlrab-Sahr

The following considerations¹ relate critically to the debate on religion and secularization during recent decades. For a long time, this debate, in Germany, was preoccupied with the question of whether what we presently experience – at least in Europe and North America – is mainly a process of secularization or one of individualization of religion (Pollack & Pickel, 2007; Rüpke, 2016). The latter interpretation assumes that religion has merely changed its institutional face (Luckmann, 1967), but has ultimately not diminished. In the United States, the secularization thesis was countered with the argument that the vitality of religion depended on an open and competitive religious and spiritual market and was not a general development related to processes of modernization (Stark, 2006).

While not denying that these interpretations were able to grasp some of the relevant developments in the religious field, I want to point to a different dynamic that seems to represent better what is currently going on. The dominant issue in the field of religion at present is, I argue, the quest for the *boundaries* and thereby – simultaneously – also for the *relation* between “religious” and “non-religious” areas, spheres of practice, actors, and claims. In a classical sociological perspective, this implies the quest for the *differentiation* and *distinction* (Luhmann, 2013) between these spheres and their related practices. I label this drawing of boundaries between religious and non-religious (or secular) spheres as *secularity* (Kleine & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2016; Wohlrab-Sahr & Burchardt, 2012).² Secularity in this understanding is a form with two sides: the religious and – derived from it – the secular as its other (see also Kleine, 2012). The opposite of secularity in this sense would not be “the religious”, but the notion of an undivided unity.³

These boundary disputes become relevant against the backdrop of various processes of social change. Some of these changes have been addressed under the labels *post-secular society* (Habermas, 2005), religious pluralization, or *popular religion* (Knoblauch, 2009). I later discuss some connections between these different theorems. What I accentuate here is a different, but related, side of this transformation, which I call the *institutional disembedding of religion*. The underlying dynamic connects to religious pluralization, especially due to migration and pluralization processes, as well as to

the growing significance of non-religious parts of the populations, in, but not restricted to, many European countries. Therefore, it is related to processes addressed by secularization theories, as well as to developments that are being dealt with by the economic theory of religion (see Stark, 2006). In contrast to these economic accounts, however, I do not see market dynamics at work, but rather contestations over the definition of the public sphere.

The institutional disembedding of religion finds an expression in the *multiplicity of religious spokespersons* and in the *variety of claims to authentic representation*, as well as in the *lack of institutional trust* that can back up these claims. This new constellation, these new actors, and their claims, I argue, are aligned with new kinds of references, which are significantly different from those under the historically previous confessional framework. Where references in this framework were mainly about tradition (and rights derived from that), as well as about equality and representation (with regard to minorities and their traditions), the new references are ultimately identity, and thereby, I argue, "infinite" in character. They may refer to a subjective inner obligation or religious sentiment, presented as non-negotiable, as well as to an alleged civilizational or collective identity, non-negotiable as well, which is proclaimed to be under threat and therefore has to be defended.

Under the condition of an institutional disembedding of religion, sentiments *emerge* in situations in which secular-religious relations are contested and negotiated. However, they also *serve as arguments* in such situations, and they support claims that are made in the public sphere. When I refer to sentiments related to the negotiation of religious-secular boundaries, it is their use in the context of claims making and rejection, that is of interest to me. I doubt that there is something like a "religious" or "secular" quality of a sentiment. Sentiments, however, play an important role in religious-secular contestations. They emerge when boundaries that were perceived as stable are shifted or being transgressed, and they are used strategically as arguments in the negotiations over such boundaries.

In the following, I refer mainly to examples from Germany, and sometimes from other European countries. The tendency I describe is, however, much more widespread. Furthermore, most of the examples that I deal with are related to Islam as the most important minority religion in Europe. The underlying mechanisms are, however, not restricted to this religion, but could as well be discussed with reference to conservative forms of Christianity, for example, in the Netherlands.

Secular self-perceptions and the de-legitimization of religious tradition

The present contestations over the reach and boundaries of religion arise with new fervor due to a changed background. This background is constituted by a co-occurrence of secularization trends and the pluralization of the religious field due to migration. The first development to be addressed is

that the religiously unaffiliated, sometimes explicitly non-religious, parts of the population, at least in Europe, have long ceased to be in the position of a small minority. In countries once dominated by one or divided between two major confessions, the non-religious population has come to play a relevant role. Important elements of their self-perception are liberal conducts of life, individualization, self-determination also with regard to sexual liberties, and women's rights. Even in the United States, the religiously unaffiliated population in 2012 had reached 20%, whereas twenty-five years earlier it was only 7% (Hout & Fisher, 2014). Different from Europe, however, in the background of this growth in the United States lies an alienation from existing churches rather than the general abandoning of religion or the belief in God.

One may differ in one's evaluation of secularization theses and their prognoses: At least for many Western European countries, but also beyond, certain processes of secularization are evident (Pollack & Rosta, 2015). The influence of churches on issues of life conduct and on the socialization of their members has significantly declined. Gender relations, positions on sexuality, cohabitation outside of marriage, and especially homosexuality – which have long been under the influence of the churches – have changed substantially. Moreover, church membership, especially among the younger, well-off parts of the population, has significantly declined. In Germany, the religiously unaffiliated and mostly also non-religious parts of the population (not totally overlapping) amount to approximately one-third of the population (Wohlrab-Sahr, 2009), in France and the Netherlands the percentage is even higher. Among those who are still affiliated with a church, there is a growing portion, which only marginally conforms to basic teachings of the churches. Sociologists of religion speak of a diffuse spirituality (see Voas & Chaves, 2016, p. 1524).

The changing composition of the population with regard to its religious affiliations supports a tendency which Charles Taylor (2007, p. 539) has labeled as a change in the "conditions of belief": Religiosity, under such conditions, requires substantiation, it can no longer be legitimized by tradition alone, which is passed on from generation to generation. It has become one option among others, and references to religious duties or traditions are far from being taken for granted. The extent to which religious traditions have become contested is evident, for example, in the debate on ritual circumcision of male Muslim or Jewish infants in Germany. Whereas representatives of the Jewish community have stressed the fundamental relation between their religion and the rite of circumcision, which they perceive as a symbol for their alliance with God (Heimann-Jelinek & Kugelmann, 2014), critics explicitly demanded the reform of this tradition and equated circumcision with a violation of human rights (see Jens, 2013). The political solution, to leave the decision over circumcision to the parents, has provisionally tamed the debate, but it could not eliminate the delegitimization of religious tradition that had become evident. The reference to a sacred tradition today is in competition with other forms of sacralization, especially those related to human rights (see Joas, 2011).

It is probably only a minority for which the need to express reasons for one's own religiosity and related practices creates a reflexive form of confession in a Protestant sense. A more widespread stance toward religious issues is simply indifference, which exists side by side with the heated debate over contested traditions, to which one no longer feels attached (see Dalferth, 2015). In addition, an eclectic mixture of elements from different religions, especially of Asian descent, among them especially ideas of rebirth, has become increasingly visible.

In summary, within and beyond the established churches we increasingly find diffuse, syncretistic forms of spirituality, an increasing number of people who are indifferent to religion, and growing parts of the populations of Western countries who are religiously unaffiliated and who no longer consider themselves religious. This condition renders the distancing from strong religious expressions likely and is a relevant source for the often-scandalizing criticisms of religious traditions and practices.

Religiosity of migrants, and the headscarf as a "negative totem"

The presence of migrants and the public visibility especially of a conservative type of religiosity put forth by some of them tends to irritate the secular self-perception of the majorities in many Western European societies. This does not only concern Muslims, even if these have been the focus of attention for several reasons. It also concerns Jewish minorities from former Soviet countries, who in some places have become the majority in Jewish communities and who (re)discover Orthodox Judaism or revitalize it in their communities (Eulitz, 2012). It also holds true for Christian migrants from Eastern Europe with Orthodox Christian or conservative evangelical backgrounds.

Global religious movements achieve a presence through social encounters as well as through the media. However, they are also increasingly present due to Islamist terrorist activities, which have left their imprint on the general perception of Islam in particular. These factors caused Jürgen Habermas to speak of a "post-secular" society in order to account for the challenging of an assumption so far taken for granted: that one lives in a secular society and that this perception is shared by one's consociates (Habermas, 2005). Habermas did not presuppose that secularity has vanished; what has vanished is the self-assurance that all share the same secular conviction.

The irritations caused by these challenges are being acted out especially at the forefront of gender relations. Certain types of clothing, rules of conduct, and forms of gender segregation among migrant communities are perceived as highly problematic symbols of gender inequality. In the overall debate, this problematization is often characterized as hypocritical, arguing that sexual self-determination and gender equality are far from being realized in the majority population. However, even if many Catholic, Protestant, or

non-affiliated parts of the population may despise homosexuals or see women's legitimate role in their care for children, family, and the home, it cannot be denied that sexual self-determination and gender equality have become legally sanctioned principles, which will not easily be revised. There is a long way between a situation in which politicians had to hide their homosexuality in order not to risk their office and one in which openly homosexuals can hold high political office; Angela Merkel as a woman can be one of the world's most influential heads of government; and an openly lesbian woman could be the main candidate of the right-wing AfD (Alternative for Germany) in Germany. All these examples indicate the degree to which gender norms and practices have shifted. Even if quotidian practices may still be different in many respects, the changes that have taken place in a relatively short period are nevertheless remarkable.

The position of women and the right to sexual self-determination have become hallmarks of contemporary Western societies. Consequently, practices that seem to signal the opposite have a strong negative connotation in the public discourse. Without doubt, this often goes along with xenophobia and sometimes even with racism. To reduce negative reactions to racism, however, would ignore the relevance of the changes that Western societies have undergone with regard to gender relations. It is also a notion of defense that is at stake when people are confronted with practices that seem to and sometimes do signal female subordination.

Sociologist Émile Durkheim has argued that societies self-sacralize with reference to a symbol of their unity and collectivity; a totem (Durkheim, 2008, pp. 207–235; see also Joas, 2017, p. 111). Hans Joas, referring to Durkheim, has argued that in contemporary Western societies the sacred has shifted to the sacralization of the person (its individual liberty, human rights, and human dignity). The totem of a society, as Durkheim has argued, can trigger strong emotions in situations of collective encounter. Although he puts his focus on emotions in situations where the totem becomes the positive – symbol of the community/society, it is worth thinking of a negative totem (Wohlrab-Sahr, 2005) as the flip side to this sacred totem, which stands for what a community deeply rejects, and which can be used in public situations to trigger negative emotions. This "negative totem" today in Western societies, I argue, is the various forms of female covering: the headscarf, the chador or niqab, especially the burqa, which are seen as diametrically opposed to the idea of individual liberty. The veiled female body becomes the symbol of bondage.

One might hypothesize that in a situation of an institutional disembedding of religion, the reification of one issue of a foreign religious practice into a negative totem is more likely inasmuch as there are no strong or trustworthy religious institutions available to counter such interpretations or to put them in context. Negative totems are being produced in a variety of media and are affirmed in the streets by actors for whom they serve as an explanation for everything that is deemed problematic to them.

Actual social life, needless to say, is more complex than the interpretations underlying the construction of negative totems. While the dominant view equates veiling with bondage and subjugation, there are, of course, voluntary decisions for veiling. This is most evident in the phenomenon of female converts who deliberately choose a type of clothing, which in other parts of the world is enforced or part of a non-negotiable dress code. Also, in Turkey or among young Turkish women abroad this practice of a deliberate use of the headscarf can be observed, which differs from its traditional use, but also from its rejection based on laicist convictions (Göle, 1997).

A queer-feminist position like Judith Butler's, however, one-sidedly points out the latter possibility. When being asked in an interview whether burqas should be allowed in schools, she equated it with the Jewish yarmulke as well as with other forms of partial female covering. When she discussed a variety of meanings, however, enforcement and the related myths remained unmentioned:

But in actuality, the burka as well as the yarmulke have different meanings. It can be a sign of private faith; it can be a way of signifying a certain belonging to community; the burka can be a way of negotiating shame and sexuality in a public sphere, or preserving a woman's honor, and even a way of resisting certain western modes of dress that signify a full encroachment of fashion and commodity dress that signifies the cultural efforts to efface Islamic practice.

(Butler, 2006, p. 2)

Her description not only equates partial and complete forms of covering – with certainly very different implications for personal interaction – but also ignores the historical battles over these types of clothing. This history becomes evident, for example, in Iran, where an unveiling decree (in 1956 issued by Shah Reza Pahlavi), which was violently enforced, is as present as obligations to veil (since Khomeini) (Chavoshian, 2019), the enactment of which by state authorities, as well as vigilant actors, was and sometimes still is no less brutal. However, there is also a variety of practices that try to undermine or circumvent such obligations.⁴

In different ways, these forms of female clothing function as symbols for the drawing of boundaries, which manifest on the body and tell us something about the boundaries of gender. They symbolize demarcations between inside and outside, private and public, secret and accessible, hidden and overt, opening and closure.

Clothing has always had a function of boundary drawing, and the shifting of boundaries – via the length of skirts or pants, décolleté, or modest necklines, or opposite to that, via the leveling of differences between male and female clothing – has always produced a certain excitement. Not least in religious contexts, in Christian as well, clothing norms existed especially

for women, like restrictions against the wearing of trousers or short skirts. However, such religiously motivated dress codes have become rare in mainline churches and are increasingly limited to minority communities like Jehovah's Witnesses or the Amish. For the majority of the population, dress codes are defined mainly by fashion and the market, and, as such, have become contingent. They have become secular. Against that background, strong religious dress codes are irritating, especially when they are related to the head or even the face, which to a high degree represents individuality. In addition, they accompany a strong demarcation of gender difference, which restricts the visibility of the female body much more than the male, and thereby signals inequality. That traditional religious interpretations underscore these restrictions with ideas about the seductive power of female hair, to which men seem to be helplessly exposed, might be unknown to most who feel offended by female veiling. However, it is obvious also to an everyday observer, like schoolchildren, that forms of veiling can subordinate women or girls to a specific regime, beyond the dictates of fashion.

It is striking that such differentiations are mostly absent in the present intellectual debates. These debates seem to proceed only between clear camps. Those, like Judith Butler, who may have good reasons to argue against the legal sanctioning of veiling, immediately treat them as modes of free choice, with no differences between forms of veiling or covering. Everything else then becomes an expression of secularist state violence. Those, like Alice Schwarzer, a well-known German journalist and feminist, who argue for the sanctioning of veiling, are obviously unable to see that she might also prohibit something that is freely chosen.

As symbols become negative totems, they become attractive for those who feel underprivileged and alienated. This, I argue, is what drives a great deal of current conflicts with Islam in Western societies. The label that I have chosen for one specific type of conversion to Islam – “symbolic emigration and symbolic battle” (Wohlrab-Sahr, 1999) – may very well fit for other combinations of alienation and aggression among young Islamists.

The new visibility of migrant religion, especially Islam, via mosques and headscarves, is indissolubly interconnected to the charging of Islamic symbols as negative totems. Islamist violence contributes to that charging, but it does not create it. One thing immediately stands for another: headscarf, veil, or burqa are instantaneously read as signs of aversion and symbols of danger. The reasons for that need further exploration.

Institutionally disembedded religion

The forms of religious expression perceived as problematic in a secular environment are not simply “alien”, unfamiliar, and in their content often conservative forms of religiosity. Beyond that, we experience a type of religious expression that I call *institutionally disembedded religion*.

Thereby I refer to the concept of disembedding, which Anthony Giddens (1990, p. 21) has characterized as one of the basic mechanisms of modernity. I extend it, however, in a somewhat different direction and relate it – different from Giddens – to religion.⁵

Giddens characterizes disembedding as the dissolution of social relations from the immediacy of local interaction contexts and from their embeddedness in local time and space. To a certain degree, all forms of functional differentiation and organization building have been forms of disembedding. They abstract from immediate face-to-face-interactions in the here and now, and only as such enable anonymous transaction over temporal and spatial distances.⁶ What Giddens describes is a mode that started long before modernity, but develops in a specific way under modern conditions, so that most of our social relations and transactions are disembedded in some way. We trust in abstract values (in the form of money, shares or even bitcoins) and in anonymous expertise that we ourselves cannot oversee or judge. Trust is then mainly trust in institutions (in organizations, currencies, banks, seals of approval etc.), not primarily trust in a reliable, well-known person (see Luhmann, 1989). Churches and other religious corporations, as sometimes worldwide bureaucratic organizations, are examples of such disembedding. However, one might ask if the mechanisms of disembedding did ever completely apply to the case of religion. Religions – in spite of institutionalization and formal organization – are always organized as communities as well: Face-to-face-contacts in parishes, a direct personal contact with the minister, the rabbi, or imam play a central role. Trust in institutions in this field is very much mediated by personal trust.

On the other hand, especially in the Christian context, trust also refers to organizations or institutions that are considered reliable. This institutional trust, at least in the European context, does not only relate to the churches and their personnel. It also relates to their embeddedness in a confessionalized religious culture and its state-church-relations. Ultimately, this implies an (assumed) consent regarding the boundaries between state and religion. A minister, for instance, who teaches religion in a state school, is expected to respect certain boundaries in his relation toward pupils, as well as in his positions toward political issues. He is also expected to keep his distance with regard to possible missionary ambitions. If he violates these expectations, the anger will not only hit him personally, but the institution for which he stands as well.

In this sense, a re-embedding occurs via the persons who represent organizations. In some parts of our life, especially in the economy, technology, media, and increasingly also in the sphere of law, disembedding has proceeded in a relatively comprehensive way. In the field of religion, however, it has been limited. Trustworthy institutions, represented by persons, play an important role. And vice versa: Trust is granted to persons, because they have backing by a reliable institution.

This is precisely the point, I argue, where the institutional disembedding of the religious is taking place. The church-state arrangements of the post-war period in Europe, which has taken different institutional forms in the European states, do not capture the situation of religion today in its entirety. State-church regulations have defined the rights and duties of religious communities, especially of the Christian churches, and at the same time have hedged them, regulated and limited their influence. This relates to what Talal Asad (2003) has described as the mutual constitution of the religious and the secular. Thereby these regulations, in spite of the granting of privileges that went along with them, were also forms of boundary drawing.

A problem emerges when new religions, which were not present during the time in which the state-church arrangement developed historically, and for whom the arrangement does not fit, enter the scene. This is, for example, because their organizational and membership structure does not match that of the established churches. There is a broad discussion about the disadvantages of these latecomers and the possibilities for compensation. Attempts have been made to integrate Islam or Alevism into the structure of church-state relations, to treat them like churches. Important examples are Islamic education in schools in some European countries, for instance, in Germany, and the education of future teachers of Islam or of imams in public universities. These attempts follow the path of religion-state relations. Religion has been given a specific place in state schools and public educational institutions, but in order to take this place, it has to be “adjusted” to these institutions. Not every kind of religious articulation, conviction, or practice can be integrated here. A religion taught in state schools and universities has to be compatible with the requirements of a secular society. It is not surprising that these attempts do not run smoothly. Studies of Islamic theology, as presently experienced in the German context, are like a laboratory in which the extension of state-church relations to a religion without a church structure is tested.⁷

However, the education of schoolteachers of Islam and imams in public universities reacts to a problem that has already been present with regard to Islamic education in state schools. It concerns the question of who these groups are that claim to represent Islam in public schools. For whom among the Muslims in the respective country are they able to speak? This question has been raised by the non-Muslim population, as well as by parts of the Muslim immigrant community. How reliable are these self-proclaimed spokespersons for “the Muslims” or “Islam” in an immigration context? There was a lack of institutional trust, of background trust, which had developed toward the churches as institutions, and which has given credit to the officials. Consequently, the institutionalization of Islamic theology in public universities, as it is presently progressing in countries like Germany or Austria, can be interpreted as an attempt to create institutional trust, inasmuch as the Islamic teacher is legitimized by a respected academic education.

However, aside from this attempt at institutionalization along the line of established church-state relations, there are various religious actors present in the public sphere of secular states, with regard to whom it is unclear who they represent or from where they get their legitimization. This is the core of the phenomenon, which I describe as institutionally disembedded religion. In many cases today, we find self-empowered claims at representation, validity, and legitimate speakership. These claims are articulated in courts, schools, universities, or enterprises. Sometimes the relevant actors are individuals, sometimes human rights organizations act vicariously for them. Instances are frequent: the violation of religious sentiments by religious critique or by utterances perceived as blasphemous; the prohibition of certain clothing; the demand for certain behavior, like shaking hands as a sign of salutation as happened in Switzerland; the denial or granting of prayer rooms and the negotiation of their usage in public buildings; the defense of traditional religious practices, like boys' circumcision.

Hubert Knoblauch has labeled "popular religion" as a new social form of religion, addressing the individual search for spirituality aside from the big religious communities (Knoblauch, 2009). To a certain degree, it can also be considered a phenomenon of disembedding, if pilgrimage, yoga, or other kinds of spiritual articulation are only loosely connected to the traditional religious communities, and consequently the regulation of religious content by these communities diminishes. Knoblauch speaks of the dissolution of religious boundaries (Entgrenzung) and sees religion moving from the churches into the sphere of popular culture. This – at first glance – captures a very similar process to what I describe as disembedding. Whereas, however, his focus is on religion entering the sphere of culture and extending its scope, I concentrate on the shifting, redefining, and renegotiation of secular-religious demarcations and on the struggles related to that. Although Knoblauch would question secularization concepts, I argue that due to the process of disembedding quarrels over secular-religious boundary demarcations become a relevant issue in many places and are being dealt with new means. References to sentiments is one of these means.

In the contestations over reach and boundaries of religion, institutional disembedding becomes visible in a different way: in forms of speakership, claims making, and the problematizing of others' behavior. At stake are not primarily spiritual issues, the contestation is about the demarcation and shifting of boundaries in the public sphere. As disembedding appears in self-empowered claims and problematizations, which in consequence aim at juridification, the question of how they are legitimized and whom they represent becomes crucial.

Disembedding of religion also attracts attention from a very different perspective. A general unease has recently been expressed on the streets, as well as in parliaments. In many European countries, this is visible in populist, right-wing movements that invoke the Islamization of European culture or

even a threat of the occident. This is the case for the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident (PEGIDA) movement, as well as its predecessors and related movements in the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Austria. Their activities are not only independent from the churches, but also not in line with their interests. Quite the opposite: often they stand in direct opposition to them. Even if some influential evangelical activists are present in PEGIDA, these groups are mostly dissenting from the institutionalized churches. Furthermore, religious issues are mostly irrelevant to the activists in these movements, especially when taking their predominant presence in the highly secularized Eastern part of Germany into consideration. However, they employ the negative Islamic reference, the negative totem, to collect a variety of political issues under this heading: a stance against the European Union, immigration, globalization, etc. The totem works even if it is not backed up with lived religiosity. This is also part of what Anthony Giddens envisioned as disembedding: that symbolic signs (in this case, the headscarf, a picture of a mosque, or the cross) are being taken out of their original frame of reference and indicate the affiliation with a movement or merely a diffuse agreement with what the symbol stands for. Stickers with scored-through mosques, as they are used by the organization "Pro Deutschland" (Pro Germany), are an example of such rejections that are condensed into a simple mission statement.

Self-empowerment and religious public intellectuals

Islamic studies scholar Reinhard Schulze – with reference to the Islamicate world⁸ – has spoken of the self-empowerment of the subject, and of the denigration of traditional religious authorities (Schulze, 2007). Interpreting the Qur'an is no longer confined to schools of Islamic scholarship but has long shifted to the Internet. What we experience today in many European countries is something similar. Religious references and interpretations have been dissolved from the interpretational power of the traditional religious communities and become weapons in the battle over reach and limitations of the religious, enacted in the streets, on the Internet, and in the courts.

This de-confessionalized, disembedded religious culture could become the arena of public religious intellectuals, who raise their voice mostly outside of religious organizations. The figure of the public intellectual is an institutionalized form of self-empowerment, often without organizational backing. In a reverse move, institutional trust – related to what Max Weber has labeled as *Amtscharisma* (charisma of office) – is substituted by trust in the personal charisma of the intellectual, in their credibility and authenticity.

In his study on the discourse on secularization in modern Egypt, Daniel Kinitz (2016) has pointed to the increasingly important role of Muslim intellectuals in the modern public sphere; intellectuals who sometimes oppose

traditional Muslim scholars, but at other times also support them in the public discourse. In any case, due to the differentiation of speaker positions, scholars can no longer claim to exclusively represent Islam: Notable scholarship can be cultivated, but in a mediatized public sphere, it does not have a structurally granted power of interpretation (Kinitz, 2016, p. 281). In his 1990 study on the Muslim League, Reinhard Schulze distinguished between two speaker positions: the traditional Islamic scholar, who draws his authority from the background of an Islamic institution, and the public intellectual who challenges traditional Islamic knowledge (Schulze, 1990). This differentiation, on the one hand, creates new possibilities of exchange between intellectuals of different regions. But, on the other hand, especially the spread of new media results in a fragmentation of Islamic authority (Eickelman & Piscatori, 2004, pp. 131–135) and a corresponding pluralization and competition of speaker positions.

Also, in Europe, Islamic intellectuals position themselves – with various agendas. Tarik Ramadan, for a long time, was a prominent example, with resonance all over Europe, even if contested with regard to his positions. In Germany, only a few can be considered candidates for such a position. One of them is certainly Navid Kermani, who, next to his activity as a scholar of Islam and publicist, has become a public religious intellectual, who obviously fills an existing gap. He, however, decidedly takes a speaker position which contradicts Islamist positions, and in this sense is highly welcomed by the German public. His public speeches have attracted great attention. In 2017, when he was granted the state prize of North-Rhine-Westphalia, he was explicitly acknowledged as a public intellectual. Of specific importance, however, was his appearance on the occasion of the granting of the peace prize of the German booksellers in 2015. There he delivered a much-acclaimed lecture in the historical St. Paul's Church in Frankfurt am Main (Kermani, 2015). What attracted particular attention however, was an Islamic prayer at the end of the peace prize ceremony. This was a symbolic act, which made clear that Kermani acted as a *religious* intellectual. This act shifted the boundaries between the religious and the secular: A religious ritual was integrated into the secular space – St. Paul's Church is a symbol of the democratic movement in Germany and is no longer used as a church – and transformed this secular space for a moment into a religious one. Even if it was an inclusive ritual, explicitly inviting non-religious and non-Muslims to join, the call for prayer nevertheless remained a religious symbolic act.

The infinity of references

In a situation of institutional disembedding of religion, the old patterns of regulation and legitimization, in reference to which coping with strangers or persons of other beliefs and convictions, have traditionally been enabled, run out of steam. This includes references to the principles of tolerance and

human rights (see Koenig, 2005). In making claims, as well as in the defense against alleged threats, infinitive references, both inwardly and externally directed, become visible. When, for example, on the international level, there is a repeated accusation of the violation of religious sentiments on the occasion of certain kinds of ridicule, caricature, or critique, the inward reference is ultimately unlimited. What is perceived as a violation of one's personal sentiments can – in legal terms – not be objectified. Consequently, the rejection of such violation is ultimately infinitive as well: it tends to aim not at a concrete aggressive act, but at a "climate" that makes aggressive acts possible. The courts, understandably, have their problems with this argument, and search for sturdier, more objectifiable issues. Nevertheless, the indication of injured religious sentiments plays an increasingly important role, especially in the international legal and human rights debate (see Rox, 2012).

This problem repeatedly shows up in the debate on Islam. Saba Mahmood (2009), for example, in her critique of a secular type of blasphemy, comes up with the notion of a Muslim habitus, a Muslim "being" that is hurt in toto by this critique, not only in certain regions of the self, meaning Muslims are unable to distance themselves from the damaging impact of blasphemy:

The notion of moral injury I am describing no doubt entails a sense of violation, but this violation emanates not from the judgement that the law has been transgressed but that one's being, grounded as it is in a relation of dependency with the Prophet, has been shaken. For many Muslims, the offence the cartoons committed was not against a moral interdiction ... but against a structure of affect, a habitus, that feels wounded. This wound requires moral action, but the language of this wound is neither juridical nor that of street protest because it does not belong to an economy of blame, accountability, and reparations. (p. 848)

I do not question that the moral injury that Mahmood mentions was felt by many Muslims when confronted with the caricatures of Prophet Mohammad. Adherents of other religions, who experience the ridicule of religion or the violation of what they consider religious laws in such a fundamental way, may have regarded this as a moral injury as well.

As Andrew March (2011) has rightly pointed out, it is problematic, however, that Mahmood proclaims this reaction to be experienced almost generally by Muslims, as if there were no other reaction – discursive, strategic, distanced intellectual, or ideological – at their disposal. This perspective becomes especially problematic when the assumption of a specific Muslim vulnerability results in demands for political and legal change in European public spheres in order to prevent such injuries from happening. The academic analyst is then at risk of becoming an ally of identity politics.

Finally, March points at the irreversibly altered role of religion:

The problem is not that our liberal, secular societies cannot recognize and appreciate religious pain (if anything religion is still assumed to be a more authentic reason for moral consideration than many secular convictions, at least in the United States), it is that subjectively felt religious pain is no longer a trump card in a world that takes race, gender, ethnicity, and class as equally important sources of identity and moral motivation.

(2011, p. 819)

Mahmood herself does not argue for a solution via blasphemy laws. She leaves the consequences of her problematization open. In the international debate on human rights, however, such consequences have been demanded. As Barbara Rox (2012) shows in her constitutional legal study, *violations of religious sentiments* entered the juridical debate mainly via the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights, and a similar notion of a “defamation of religions” entered the debate via resolutions of the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council.

Defamation of religion originally referred to the defamation of Islam, introduced as a proposal for a UN resolution by Pakistan in 1999 for the Organization of the Islamic Conference (now Organization of Islamic Cooperation) (Rox, 2012, p. 313). It was then extended to cover the defamation of religions in general. The respective resolutions urge states to combat the “defamation of religion, especially the defamation of Islam ‘as such’” (Rox, 2012, p. 319, my translation). Rox argues that in this debate we can observe an extension from physical to psychological attacks and, finally, to the “intoxication of the climate”. This intoxication also encompasses the intentional creation of negative stereotypes about religions, their adherents, and their saints(!) in the media, politics, and society, and the related intentional provocations (Rox, 2012, p. 318).

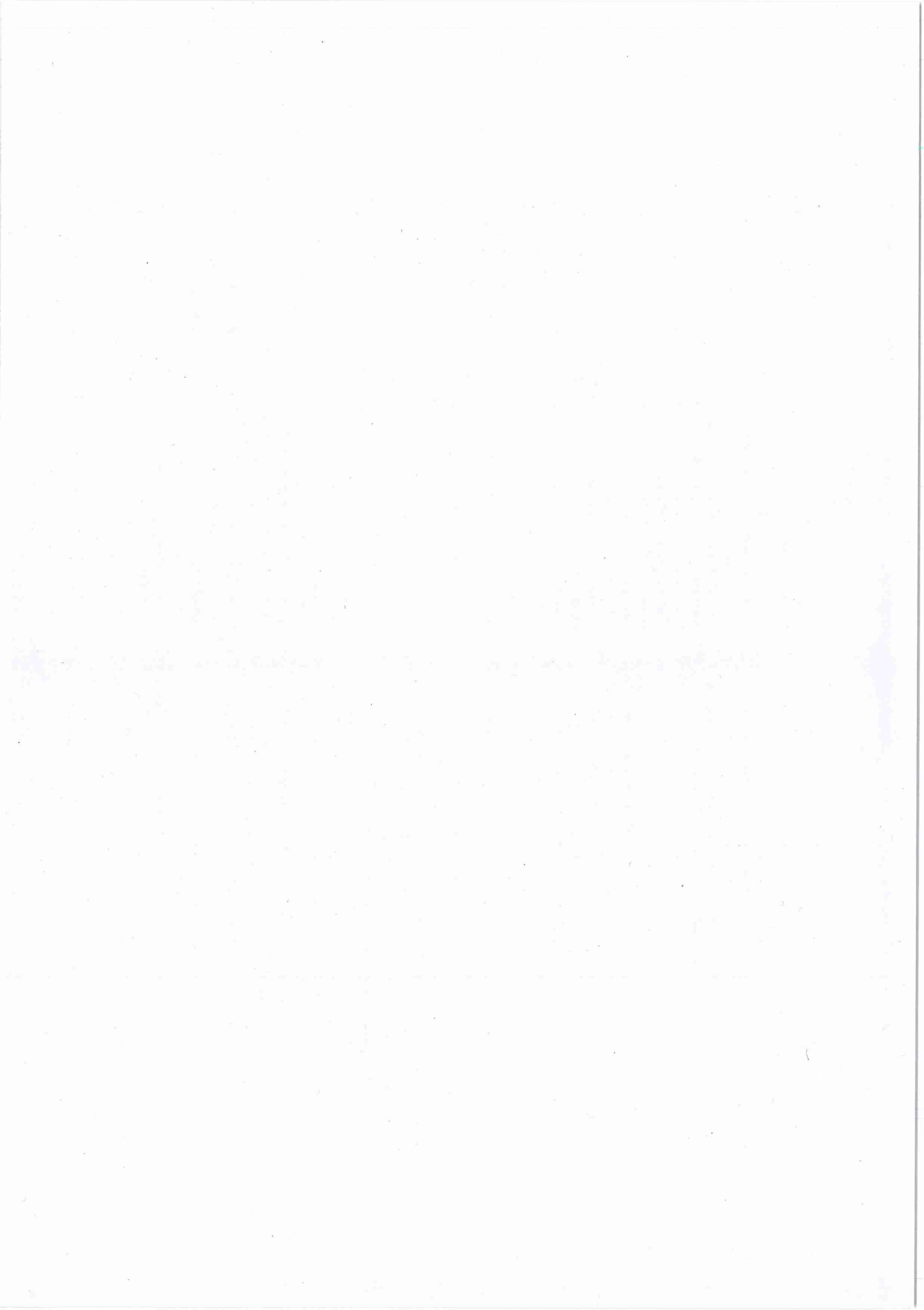
Parallel to this, one observes the equation of racial discrimination with the defamation of religions, and of racial hate with hatred of religions. This equation of race and religion is reminiscent of Saba Mahmood’s argument that it morally hurts Muslims in the center of their being if the prophet is ridiculed.

There is no doubt that, against the background of Islamist violence, in a variety of contexts, a stereotypical defamation of Islam and Muslims is going on. It becomes complicated, however, when legal regulations are being demanded that refer to the level of a *societal climate* and aim at the prohibition of utterances that might influence this climate to the disadvantage of certain groups. The constitutional juridical debate in Germany is highly suspicious with regard to this, and also in UN-resolutions on the defamation of religions the rates of approval are declining (Rox, 2012, p. 349). From the

legal perspective, the demand for interventions into basic liberty rights, for the sake of achieving societal tolerance toward Muslim minorities, is a risky endeavor. The fact that resolutions like that are being proposed by countries like Pakistan, in which the accusation of blasphemy can be life-threatening, makes such attempts even more questionable. It becomes obvious that quarrels over blasphemy or the violation of religious sentiments are not only abstract philosophical debates but pushed forward by actors with strong interests. This does not make the scientific nor the societal debate superfluous, but it indicates that there is more to the debate than abstract principles. This, of course, also holds true if representatives of “Christian” parties in Germany demand the general protection of religion – meaning Christianity – against the mockery of critics.

In addition, I would argue that the widespread tendency among certain societal groups that claim the term “critical” for themselves, to identify Islamophobia with racism follows the logic of such pedagogical intervention in societal liberties. These activists, of course, would not consider themselves allies of strong blasphemy laws. But the blurring of differences between race and religion, racist assaults and the violation of religious sentiments, hate speech and mockery, attack on public peace and attack on religion, attack on persons who hold something sacred, and attack on this sacred as such – all this not only leads to an obscuring of phenomena and terminology, but also to a diffuse pedagogization and juridification of the public sphere. In this mood, which at first glance aims at acceptance and tolerance, strong religious-political actors can join in and follow their own agenda.

The examples indicate that the spectrum of demands and complaints that are being brought forward by various speakers in a situation of religious disembedding are infinite in a double sense. At one end of the spectrum, we find complaints referring to the violation of religious sentiments, for which there cannot be clear criteria, and which, in the end, intend to change a social climate that they experience as painful. At the other end of the spectrum, we find complaints referring to a threat of “culture” or “civilization”. In the streets of European cities and in movements, libertarian only by name, the Islamization of culture is being invoked. Moreover, on the international level – for instance, in the context of the United Nations – countries like Russia or Pakistan invoke the protection of “traditional values” (see Stöckl, 2017). In all these contexts, we find references to human rights: The protection of traditional values as a necessary precondition for the defense of human rights, and the violation of religious sentiments as an assault on human rights. The references to human rights and tolerance, which in the context of cultural or inter-religious encounter could serve as guidelines, are threatening to lose their orientation function. They have long become weapons in the battle over dominance and the shifting of boundaries between the religious and the secular, but also between a liberal or conservative understanding of religion. The violation of human rights is being denounced only to limit



other human rights. The protection of religious sentiments stands against freedom of speech and of the arts, the protection of traditional values stands against the right of self-determination, especially with regard to sexuality. The orientation function of such references to human rights, which have been so important in civil rights activities or in inter-religious dialogue, seems to have been lost.

Consequently, the disembedding of religion, which – without doubt – also entails individualizing and democratic potentials, has opened a space for new contestations over the boundaries between the religious and the secular, in which strong actors raise their voices and articulate their claims. Speaker positions and communication power (Reichert, 2010) outside the realm of traditional institutions gain new relevance. Some of these activities may be subject to new regulations; others will leave their imprints on public debates for a long time to come.

Notes

- 1 This chapter refers in parts to Wohlrab-Sahr (2019, in press).
- 2 These questions are dealt with in the Humanities Centre for Advanced Study “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities” at Leipzig University, funded by the DFG since 2016. See: www.multiple-secularities.de.
- 3 This is, especially in the debates on secularity and Islam, or Hinduism, not a mere abstract possibility. In her comment on Jackson’s (2017) notion of an *Islamic secular*, Humeira Iqidar questions the differentiationist perspective as such: “The success of differentiation theory lies not in accurately describing an empirical reality, but in concretizing a shift in popular imagination. It is worth pausing to ask: Why do we need differentiation? What forms of human behaviour and subjectivity are endorsed by assuming that human life can or should be divided into these separate spheres? How is differentiation linked to capitalism? What role did differentiation play, if any, in pre-capitalist societies?” (Iqidar, 2017, p. 36).
- 4 The practice of face covering, however, was not a relevant practice in Iran.
- 5 In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor also speaks of the “great disembedding” (2007, p. 146), which he sees related to the changes of the “Axial Age”, namely the emergence of immanence/transcendence distinctions, in sharp contrast to “early” or “archaic” religion, in which – according to Taylor – humans were embedded in various ways: in society, cosmos, and the Divine. The distinction between immanence and transcendence disrupts this order, with far-reaching consequences. As Ian Hunter has rightly argued, Taylor presents a philosophical narrative, “in which a lost normative order with a metaphysical character supplies the hermeneutic key to a single general history of secularization” (Hunter, 2011, p. 617).
- 6 In this sense – with reference to economy – the term was introduced by Karl Polanyi (1944/2001).
- 7 On the question of integrating Islam in Germany, see also: Peter (2009); Tezcan (2018), and Amir-Moazami (2018).
- 8 This expression was coined by Marshall Hodgson in his pioneering work “The Venture of Islam” (1974). With this term Hodgson distinguished between “Islam as such”, that is, the religion of Islam, and the “overall culture in which

religion simply takes its place” (1974, pp. 57–58). He therefore restricted “the term ‘Islam’ to the religion of the Muslims, not using that term for the far more general phenomena, the society of Islamdom and its Islamicate cultural traditions” (1974, p. 58).

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