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Relocating Religious Authority

Application for Funding in the Koselleck Program/DFG

1. Research question

The project investigates recent developments in the religious field in which the locus of religious authority is shifting away from religious communities to other social sites, where religious expectations and norms are communicated through various mediatized forms of expression or decided upon by new experts. These new places, forms of expression and expertise can support and reinforce traditional religious authorities. It is more likely, however, that they compete with them, and that this competition leads to reactions on the part of the classical religious authorities.

I will focus on three such places in particular:

a. **Courts,** where religion-related claims are heard and which thus inevitably also decide on what is "irrefutable" or "inescapable" in religious terms. The primary medium of communication here is hearings, legal discussions and legal rulings (**law**).

b. The **internet**, where religious influencers provide information on questions of religious lifestyle, where fatwas are distributed on issues considered relevant to religious law, where preachers interpret religious sources, and where controversial issues are debated in online forums. The main medium of communication here is moral positioning (**morality**).

c. The **street**, where populist movements express their demands and outrage, either directly referring to (to them) religiously relevant issues (e.g. abortion; blasphemy, cowslaughter etc.) or bringing religion into play where other issues are of primary concern (e.g. migration, ethnic minorities etc.). **Rumors** and **feelings** are the primary medium of communication here.

There are, of course, cross-connections between these three levels: Courts can rule on issues that are scandalized on the street or online, and movements on the street or online can try to influence courts.

My hypothesis is that this is associated with a **shift in religious authority**. What is experienced and perceived as religion and, above all, what is considered religiously binding is increasingly being decided by lay experts outside of traditional religious organizations, communities and schools. This changes the character of religion itself, but – depending on the structure of religious authority – in different ways. Where a central authority exists, it is likely that competition and a multiplication of claims to authority arise. Where there is no such central authority (Islam, Hinduism), there may be a mainstreaming of religious normativity beyond the classical theological authorities and schools of thought. I assume that in both cases we can speak of a shift in religious authority. The question is whether and how this changes what is regarded as religious truth. A reduction to "simple" truths and thus a decrease in complexity, a more "conservative" interpretation in questions of lifestyle and thus a limitation of the canon would be conceivable. However, it is also conceivable that the canon will tend to dissolve into a wide

variety of interpretations. In this way, the project can be connected with Christoph's project on Changing Epistemes.

2. Relations to existing sociological narratives

The project aims to make a substantial contribution to the question of religious change in the age of the Internet from a global perspective. There have been several such interpretations of religious change in the history of sociology, to which the project relates and from which it departs:

Disenchantment (Weber): From the magic garden to the disenchanted world.

Secularization (early P.L. Berger and others): From the sacred canopy to the pluralization of ideological options.

Privatization (Luckmann): From public to private religion

Going public (Casanova): From private to public religion

Popularization (Knoblauch): from limited ecclesiastical to unbounded, popular religion

Disembedding (Taylor): From the embedded, pre-reflexive religion of a porous self to the disembedded, reflexive optionality of a "buffered self" in the secular age.

Fragmentation (Gorski): From the fragmented to the temporarily monopolized to the again fragmented, pluralized sacred.

Most of these interpretations consider the religious field in the narrower sense. Weber – one could say – with his disenchantment narrative first of all deals with the formation of a religious field as such. The others consider religion/religiosity in the narrower sense: religion shrinks and dwindles, becomes private or public, is popularized, becomes a private option or is fragmented after a temporary phase of monopolization. In Knoblauch and Gorski's work, tendencies towards the dissolution of boundaries of the religious field are sometimes taken into account, but these are more likely to be tendencies towards a *pluralisation of religion* as such. As a rule, the focus is on the West (exception: Casanova).

The proposed project is not primarily concerned with such forms of multiplication or pluralization, but rather with the *dislocation of religion* in a specific sense, i.e. with a *shift of the locus of religious authority* into the (a) realm of the courts, (b) the internet, and (c) populism in the streets.

This raises the question of the consequences a) for the understanding of religion; b) for traditional religious authorities; c) for the role of religion in society. Connections are possible to Bourdieu's (and others') works on the boundaries of the religious field.

3. Forms of work

I would like to put together an international working group to investigate these questions. In addition to examining the specific contexts, the investigations will also serve to determine the framework of the assumed process of change and to relate them to **different constellations of religious authority**: on the one hand, strong religious organizations (churches), on the other hand, a traditionally existing plurality of religious schools, which were nevertheless able to assert claims to religious authority and were recognized as such.

Possible countries:

- India (role of the Brahmins; populism in the street)

- Turkey or another Islamic country (Islamic influencers and preachers)

- Germany? (Ministers as influencers, re-integrated in the church hierarchy)

- an Orthodox Christian country (influencers)

As the core of the working group, 3-4 people (postdocs, PhD students) should be employed in the project for the duration of the project, which is 5 years in total, while others should join as experts for shorter periods or be visited on site. This will also make it possible to include other countries in the analysis.

The application will be for the maximum of 1.25 million euros, i.e. 250,000 euros per year.