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Atheism, Religion, Indifference

Observations and Interpretations on Youth, Religion and Education in West Germany¹

by Friedrich Schweitzer

Résumé

Après une description des attitudes religieuses des adolescents en Allemagne de l'Ouest, à base des études empiriques actuelles sur la jeunesse, sur la religion et l'Eglise, plusieurs interprétations différentes sont considérées. S'appuyant sur des approches psychologiques et sociologiques et sur des analyses historiques, l'auteur propose une pluralité des perspectives interprétatives. Dans la dernière section, des questions comparatives sur l'Allemagne de l'Ouest et l'Allemagne de l'Est sont discutées.

Summary

After a description of attitudes towards religion among West German youth which is based on empirical data from current studies on youth, religion and the church, several different interpretations are considered. Drawing on psychological and sociological approaches as well as on historical analyses, the author suggests a multiperspective interpretation. In a final section, comparative perspectives between West and East Germany are discussed.

Zusammenfassung

Nach einer Beschreibung der religiösen Einstellungen von Jugendlichen in Westdeutschland, die sich auf neuere empirische Studien zu Jugend, Religion und Kirche stützt, wird eine Reihe unterschiedlicher Interpretationsmöglichkeiten erwogen. Gestützt auf psychologische, soziologische und historische Deutungsansätze plädiert der Autor für eine mehrperspektivische Interpretation. Im letzten Teil werden Fragen eines Vergleichs zwischen West- und Ostdeutschland diskutiert.

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In this article I want to describe and to interpret the situation of West German youth in respect to religion and to religious education. Since 1990, the date of the German reunification, West Germany no longer exists as a formal political unit. Nevertheless, given

1 This paper was prepared for the meeting of ISREV (International Seminar on Religious Education and Values) in Goslar, Germany, August 1994. There it was part of a joint presentation on the situation of youth in East and West Germany by Jürgen Henkys and me (see his article in this volume).

the existence of two separate Germanies between World War II and 1990, it still makes sense to focus on West Germany (or East Germany), rather than Germany as a whole. Both Germanies have developed in different ways, politically and economically but also religiously. Five years after the reunification, the differences are still strong, especially in respect to religion².

It is difficult to say which categories will be appropriate for the task of describing and interpreting religion in West German youth. The three terms which are mentioned in the title of my article - atheism, religion, indifference -, are characteristic of different perspectives and even of contradictory points of view^{3,4}. Many observers consider the West German youth as mostly indifferent, that is, without a clear attitude towards questions of religion. Others claim that such a description is not objective but is due to subjective (religious) value judgments which are operative with the observers and which make it impossible for them to even perceive young people's religion. And although atheism is sometimes said to exert a growing influence in West Germany, the data may not support this view. In other words: There is no agreement on the interpretive value of any one of the three terms. We will have to examine how far these terms will stand up in the actual analysis of the respective situations.

There is more agreement among researchers⁵ that the concept of secularization is of limited value to an analysis of the religious situation in West Germany. Effects of secularization may be observed but the processes involved are more complex than the term secularization usually implies. This term will therefore only play a minor role in my analysis.

I will start out with a statistical description of youth and religion in West Germany and will then move on towards more general questions of interpretation. In a final section, some comparative aspects between East and West Germany will be taken up. - I am writing as a Protestant religious educator and practical theologian but I will attempt to do justice to the religious situation in general.

1. Attitudes Towards Religion Among West German Youth

First, I want to present some statistical information. This information may serve as an introduction for those who are not familiar with the West German situation, but at the same time, it is to bring out some of the puzzling questions which are entailed by this situation⁶.

2 Terwey/McCutcheon 1994.

3 See J. Henky's article on an interpretation of these terms from an East German perspective (in this copy, p. 289-299). Some of what he explains there, also applies to the West German situation.

4 For a discussion see, for example, Luckmann 1963, Luhmann 1977, Kaufmann 1989, 147-171.

5 Matthes 1964, Rendtorff 1972.

6 For a general descriptive introduction to the religious situation in Germany see Kaufmann/Schäfers 1988.

* In terms of religious affiliation, the following major groups can be distinguished⁷: About 83% of the West German population under the age of 20 belong to either the Protestant or Catholic Church. About 7% are without any formal religious affiliation. 5% are Muslims⁸. Taken together, these groups account for 95-96% of the West German adolescents. The others belong to smaller religious denominations or groups. So-called New Religious Movements have very little impact, at least in terms of official affiliation⁹.

Since this high degree of formal religious affiliation may be surprising, an explanatory remark on drop out rates seems in place. Statistics on church membership¹⁰ indicate that drop out rates have stayed fairly low (with a maximum of about one percent during most of the 20th Century, and a little more than one percent only in the 1990s). The rates show a pattern which is clearly related to German history. Four points of rapidly increasing drop out rates may be observed: 1919, after the separation of church and state; during the 1930s, under the influence of National Socialism; in the late 1960s, when there was a cultural shift towards liberalization and against all traditional institutions; in the 1990s, after the German unification. Drop out rates are higher with Protestants than Catholics, but the general pattern includes many parallels¹¹.

- * The high degree of church affiliation is related to (infant) baptism: Close to 100% of the German children are baptized at an early age in the Catholic or Protestant Church¹².
- * Protestant youth are invited to take part in confirmation at about the age of 14. Compared to the (Protestant) baptisms 14 years earlier, even more than 100% of them take part in confirmation¹³.
- * One last aspect, which fits this picture, refers to religious education which is taught as a subject in public school: Roughly speaking (detailed statistics are not available on a national level), a huge majority of children and youth take part in religious education, starting at the age of seven and continuing up to the age of at least 16 or 17.

Of course, these statistical figures have to be interpreted. At first glance, they seem to indicate a very high degree of active involvement with the churches. But this is only half the truth, even at the level of statistics. A second set of data makes this quite clear:

- * Participation in Sunday worship services is considerably lower than the numbers for church affiliation: 60-70% of Catholic and 80-90% of Protestant youth say that they

7 Statistisches Bundesamt 1993, 68.

8 So far, no research has been done on the religious situation of Muslim youth in Germany (cf. Zentrum für Türkeistudien 1994 for general information). Consequently, in what follows, the situation of Muslim youth cannot be addressed.

9 Schmidtchen 1987; for more informal types of influence see EKD 1993a, 11.

10 EKD 1993b, 6.

11 EKD 1994, 6, Pittkowski 1990.

12 EKD 1994, 6.

13 EKD 1993b, 10.

never go to church¹⁴. There is a clear difference between younger and older adolescents: The older they are, the less adolescents tend to go to church.

* About 10% participate in youth groups related to religion or church¹⁵.

Given this second set of data, the conclusion may be that while church membership rates in West Germany are very high and while the numbers for baptism, confirmation and religious education in public school are also very high, active involvement in church sponsored programs is in fact very low to nonexistent. This tension between formal church affiliation and religious behavior is quite characteristic of the West German situation. How is it to be explained?

2. Interpretation

2.1 The Context of Interpretation

As we enter the field of interpretation, it is useful to emphasize that this is not a neutral field. Rather, we encounter tensions and oppositions between different interpretations and between contradictory points of view. Most often, such interpretations are connected to policies of education and of church leadership. Interpretations may inform action but they may also arise from certain policies, and they may then be considered as political interests.

Conservative interpreters tend to see religion among West German youth as undue modernism. They criticize a loss of religious commitment and a loss of values and orientation¹⁶. From their point of view, the majority of the adolescents are not to be considered as truly religious and their church membership is held to be only of formal nature.

In this opinion, conservatives actually agree with their liberal counterparts, especially in education and in the social sciences. Here the leading assumption still is that secularization has greatly diminished the influence of religion in West German youth¹⁷. And while many liberals agree with the assumption of secularization, they often welcome the decline of religion because, opposed to conservatives, they consider the educational influence of religion to be oppressive and neuroticizing.

Due to the conviction that religion has become meaningless for West German youth, religion is often neglected in youth surveys and research projects¹⁸. Because the researchers are convinced that religion does not play a significant role in the life of today's adolescents, they will not even ask questions about it, at least not beyond formal church membership.

Somewhere in between conservatives and liberals, there is a third point of view which allows for a somewhat different interpretation. According to this interpretation,

14 Eiben 1992.

15 Schmidtchen 1993, 85.

16 Köcher 1987.

17 Zinnecker 1993.

18 Nipkow 1993.

we are neither dealing just with a loss of religion, nor are we dealing with a liberation from religion. Rather, we encounter a transformation of religion¹⁹. In this view, we have to distinguish between the institutions and the individuals. It is the traditional religious institutions which have lost much of their impact, while individual religion remains an important part of life, be it in private (which is the typical case) or be it in public (beyond the traditional religious institutions).

Interpretations and policies of education go together. Where a decline of religion is deplored, the response is premised on the alternative between evangelization or resignation. And where secularization is welcomed, religion is to be omitted from the curriculum. The third attitude which may be called critical adaptation to the transformation of religion, is rare. Especially religious education has developed various models of correlation between tradition and situation²⁰ but these models have not exerted much influence in terms of a more general public.

Given these tensions between different policies and given the questions which are connected to them, I will now attempt a closer look at the religious situation of West German youth. And in doing so, I will argue for a multiperspective interpretation of this situation²¹.

2.2 Three complementary explanations

(1) As we have seen from the data presented earlier, there is an age related tendency away from participation in church activities. The further young people in West Germany move into adolescence, the more tenuous their relationship to the church seems to become. A first suggestion may therefore be to understand religion in adolescence as a type of adolescent development. It may then be interpreted in terms of the psychology of the human life cycle.

Within such a psychological frame of reference, two points of view may be taken: First, one may look at adolescent religion with the eyes of a psychoanalyst who traces the effects of adolescents' detachment from their parents and of the formation of personal identity. Distance to the church and a questioning or doubtful attitude towards all religious tradition are then seen as part and parcel of the adolescent search for autonomy. A religious moratorium may be necessary for the individual for the sake of maturity, and for culture and religion they may contain the promise of challenge and renewal²².

This is also affirmed by a second psychological approach - the structural-developmental theory of religion. Here the stress is on the acquisition of formal operational thinking which often takes place in adolescence. Formal operations are seen as a presupposition of a critical appraisal or refusal of religious symbolism and tradition. Critical or even demythologizing views of religion are to be expected²³.

19 Schweitzer 1994, Drehsen 1994.

20 Baudler 1984, Nipkow 1982.

21 Cf. Schweitzer 1987, 1992.

22 Erikson 1968.

23 Fowler 1981, Oser/Gmünder 1984.

Both psychological interpretations suggest that the breaking away from traditional religion in adolescence will only last for a limited period of time. The built-in dynamics of the life cycle which in the first place make teenagers give up their religious affiliation, will eventually bring them back to the church as they, inevitably, grow older.

At least in part the data seem to support such an understanding of religion in terms of adolescent development. Cross-sectionally speaking, we observe a high number of church committed children, low numbers in adolescence and young adulthood, and again higher numbers in later life.

(2) There are, however, competing explanations which refute this psychological optimism by referring to the social forces of modernization. In this sociological approach, first of all reference is made to secularization. The difference between young and old people's religious commitment is not seen as a repetitive pattern of cyclical development. Rather, it is understood to mirror a breakdown of religious tradition which is to stay. While in former generations religious education was still effective, so the argument runs, transmission of religion has come to a definite end with today's adolescents²⁴. Secularization has now trickled down from the enlightened public to the parental roots of religion in childhood. Based on this perception which may be deplored by conservatives but may also be appraised by liberals, religion is seen at a loss with today's adolescents.

Sometimes this view is also shared by religion teachers who feel that in their classrooms they encounter a new reality of "non-religion" as one teacher has called it²⁵. At the same time there are many observations from social scientific research which indicate that secularization may in fact not be an adequate description. If one does not only take into consideration religion as it is represented and embodied by the church as an institution, it becomes more difficult to speak of a decline of religion among West German youth. Rather it seems that while institutional religion is losing support, personal or individual religion continues to be present among adolescents²⁶. - Looking once more at the statistical results²⁷, we can see that many adolescents who do not go to church, nevertheless indicate that they pray or that they do believe in afterlife. The results concerning a belief in God are even more striking. Only about 5-10% of West Germans say that they do not believe in God²⁸.

Instead of secularization these observations may be better explained by reference to the sociological concepts of pluralization, individualization and privatization²⁹. Just like other parts of modern society, religion has undergone a process of differentiation and, consequently, there now is a clear separation between church religion and individual religion. What appears to be a religious decline from the perspective of the church, may then, from the perspective of the individual, be considered a transformation of religion - an observation which reminds us of the perspective nature of descriptions like indiffer-

24 For further discussion cf. Feige 1990b.

25 Bergau 1989.

26 Sziegaud-Roos 1985, Feige 1982, Schmid 1989.

27 Eiben 1992, Fuchs 1985.

28 Köcher 1987.

29 Berger 1979, Beck 1986.

ence. Most likely it is not the adolescents who think of themselves as indifferent towards all questions of ultimate meaning and truth, but it is the religion teachers and church representatives who call them that because adolescents are not responsive to their offerings.

What kind of religion do we find with West German youth? How can it be described? Individualized and privatized religion may be Christian in the sense of church dogmatics but in most cases it is not. In fact theology seems to be of very little influence with them. Their understanding of God or of afterlife is not expressed in terms of trinitarian doctrine or in terms of resurrection. Often there seems to be a personal mix of very different ideas which is shaped by Western as well as Eastern religions or by very general notions of "higher powers". The question of theodicy plays a major role. Questions of science and religion, referring to the beginning and end of life, are also important. The individuals' beliefs are closely related to the experience of their own lives' worlds³⁰. Nevertheless it remains remarkable that only very few adolescents claim that they clearly do not believe in God or that there is no God whatsoever. Too little, however, is known about what exactly they mean when they think of a higher power or of an immortal soul.

Special mention has to be made of the Kirchentag, a biannual meeting which attracts numerous young people from all over the country³¹.

(3) So far I have drawn on psychological and sociological theories in order to understand West German adolescents' relationship to church and religion. But the psychological and sociological factors are not specific for West Germany. The respective theories of adolescent development or of modernization apply to many countries. They also apply to East Germany or, for example, to the United States although the religious situation is different in each case. In the light of such differences it becomes important to ask about the particular situation in different countries or regions like West Germany. As opposed to the more general understanding of modernization as it is described by sociology, such a national or regional approach may be called historical. From this point of view, we have to consider particular historical situations as they result from historical presuppositions but also from individual or corporative decision making and action.

In terms of West German research on youth and religion, such a historical approach to the current situation is for the most part unknown territory. Very little thought has been given to the religious analysis of the historical time between 1949 and 1990 which is the time of the former West German Federal Republic. Most often the 1950s with their high rates of active participation in church activities and their low to nonexistent drop out rates for church membership are taken as the backdrop against which the corresponding data are matched today. Through this procedure people are encouraged to assume that until the 1950s adherence to institutionalized religion was to be taken for granted, with only a few outcasts remaining outside the general consensus.

30 Nipkow 1987, Schmid 1989, Fischer/Schöll 1994, also see Barz 1992 and Nembach 1987.

31 See Schmieder/Schumacher 1984, Feige et al. 1987.

What often goes unmentioned is the otherwise well known fact that the high degree of church membership in post-war West Germany was, at least among others, the result of a widespread reentry into the church by many who had dropped church membership during National Socialism³². Be it for reasons of regaining and demonstrating personal integrity which at that time seemed to hinge upon one's Christian faith, or be it for dealing with a loss of meaning and orientation which followed the downfall of Hitler's follies - in either case the return to the church appeared to be the choice to make.

In addition to this, the reliance of the conservative governments of the 1950s upon church and Christianity for support and legitimation has to be taken into account³³. The first decade of the West German state was marked by a conservative cooperation between state and church, and together with the economical affluence of the 1960s this made for the specific climate of the time.

In my opinion, the inner and outer distance to the church which young people have tended to keep since the mid 1960s, therefore is not to be understood as a general distance in relation to religion or even to Christianity - it is a distance towards the particular church which was experienced most of all during the formative first one and a half decades after the war.

The adolescents of the 1960s and 1970s make up the group which was least open to institutionalized religion, in some sense even to all religion. Since the 1980s a certain change has been observed³⁴. Most markedly there is an increase of interest in religious questions and in personal religious practices. And even if this religious renewal does not carry over very much to the church, it still has brought about friendlier attitudes towards religion in general.

The interpretation which this historical perspective suggests is that of different age groups or cohorts. There are different cohorts in the history of the West Germans³⁵, and it is their specific encounter with the religion and society of their time which has shaped their religious attitudes.

A second historical consideration is much more specific. It refers to adolescence and to the history of adolescence. As many have learned especially from the famous studies by Ph.Ariès³⁶, adolescence itself is not a biological given but is subject to historical change. I do not want to deal here with the controversial issue whether adolescence should be called an 18th century invention altogether or whether a more or less timeless physiological core has to be acknowledged. There is hardly any doubt that the particular shape which adolescence takes on at a certain time, is in fact historically variable, and only from this my argument will flow³⁷.

If adolescence is a variable phenomenon, it makes sense to ask how the shape of educational institutions and the shape of adolescence are related to each other. Generally speaking, it is assumed that institutions like the school but also the development of the modern family or the decline of child labor have strongly influenced the modern shape of

32 Cf. Feige 1989 and 1990a for a general overview.

33 Kaiser/Doering-Manteuffel 1990.

34 Eiben 1992, Schmidtchen 1993.

35 Zinnecker 1987.

36 Ph.Ariès 1962.

37 Cf. Schweitzer 1994.

adolescence. - In my opinion this relationship entails far-reaching consequences, among others for religious education which so far have not been considered enough, at least in Germany. What we have to do is ask the question of how certain shapes of adolescence as they develop historically on the one hand, and the institutions and programs of religious nurture and education on the other hand, go - or do not go - together. Only certain programs will fit the respective shape of adolescence. Much of what is offered today seems to miss all possible interests of young people since such offerings are premised on a type of youth which no longer exists.

In Germany, examples for this can be found among others with the organizations and groups of Christian youth. Such associations presuppose that adolescence has taken on the shape of a time in life which is relatively free from societal obligations and is characterized by an ability and motivation for self organization. Not surprisingly the respective forms of youth work have flourished at a time when - at the beginning of this century - prolonged adolescence became a given for more and more people in Germany.

Today adolescence has lost most of its traditional characteristics but it often seems that the institutions and programs of Christian education are very slow to accommodate such changes. This is not only true for the decline of traditional adolescence as prolonged transition towards which Christian youth work often seems to be geared but is even more true for the relatively new fields of an extended early adolescence or for so-called postadolescence.

2.3 Conclusions

What conclusions may be drawn from such attempts of explanation? What can be said about atheism, religion and indifference? It is in fact striking that very few adolescents - or adults - in West Germany would call themselves atheists or would claim an attitude of indifference. In fact many think of themselves as religious or religiously interested but it is also true that religion and religious are abstract terms which are rarely used by the people themselves.

What seems to be most characteristic is an individual type of religion which is embodied in the deep structures of pluriform life worlds. Sometimes such religion can be described in terms of traditional religious practises like prayer, but more often it just takes on the shape of a basic attitude towards life. In many cases this religion does not show clear characteristics. It is not based on dogma or definitions. It is a mobile faith, a flexible and fluid strand in the tissues of life history.

From the perspective of theological dogmatics or from a church point of view, this religion is vague and in many cases it is seen as inauthentic, deficient, not true to the Christian faith. But we should not forget that the adolescents themselves see church religion as dated, conservative, and as unfree.

For religious education the tension between church, theological doctrine and tradition on the one hand and individual religion on the other may be the most crucial challenge in West Germany. If religious education is unable to relate to individual religion, none of its aims can be fulfilled. And there are clear signs that in today's situation the relationship between religious education and adolescent religion is weakening. In any case this relationship is not becoming stronger.

What makes it so difficult for religious education to relate to individual religion? In my opinion it is the very complexity of factors which play their role simultaneously and which constitute challenges if not obstacles for religious education:

- * First, the task of dealing with adolescence which has always been especially difficult for church and religious education in most Christian traditions;
- * Second, the challenge of pluralization and individualization which has yet to find an adequate response from Christianity;
- * And third, the historical legacies which are connected with German history after 1945.

In concluding this section, I should say that I am not sure how many of my colleagues in West Germany would agree with me. Many religious educators might in fact be more supportive of calling today's adolescents hedonistic, or they would at least deplore their indifference. But such ways of speaking about youth are in danger of becoming derogatory, and therefore they seem dangerous to me: It may well turn out that calling adolescents indifferent, also serves educators and churches to identify scapegoats which are to be held responsible for a felt lack of educational success.

3. Comparative Perspectives (together with Jürgen Henkys³⁸)

The situation in West Germany calls for comparison with the situation in East Germany. The need for such comparison arises on a practical level, since there is only one Germany now, and all of us have to work together and we have to learn to understand each other. In addition to this, on a theoretical level, the two Germanies are as close to a quasi-experiment as one can be: From an identical starting point in 1945 the two parts of Germany have developed along their own lines. So they may offer a chance to compare the influence, for example, of politics or of state induced atheism.

But comparison is also difficult. It would be all too easy to just look at statistical figures and to forget about their limited meaning. Even baptism or confirmation meant, and probably also continue to mean, something different in East and West. So rather than offering anything conclusive we will just mention a number of points for possible comparison.

Comparing the developments in East and West, a first common characteristic may be found in the effects of outside conditions. Church membership seems to develop according to the social support or to the social pressure in the response of a given society towards religion. This correlation between religious affiliation and social conditions might be considered as the basic explanation for the different developments in the two parts of Germany. But in order to get a fuller understanding of the processes involved, more factors have to be considered.

Beside the political aspects which resulted from different political outlooks, there are common tendencies to be observed. Both parts of Germany have been subject to the effects of modernization. Both have become differentiated and individualized societies.

38 See note 1.

Even if, due to the political system, privatization and pluralization were more limited in the East, they were still operative there to some degree. And there have also been identical influences, most of all through the media of the West. West German television was widely consumed in the East. These common tendencies and influences may explain the parallel differentiation between institutional and personal forms of religion.

Furthermore, in both parts of Germany the traditional shape of church structures and activities have left their marks. In either case the concept of Volkskirche, the attempt to include people on the basis of very flexible membership status and without clear expectations for commitment or doctrinal consensus³⁹, is still operative. This is especially surprising for the East since the social presuppositions for such an understanding of the church were no longer given after 1945. It could be supposed that this is an example of how traditions remain operative even when their former social support has weakened or when other decisions for example for more clear-cut membership criteria have been made.

The contrary holds true for another point of comparison: young people's religious affiliations. While social pressure has become more and more effective in the East over the years and more young people than older ones have no religious affiliation⁴⁰, there is a remarkable percentage of active and committed young people. Compared to the parallel age group in the West, the eastern group stands out as more active, more committed to the church but also as less conventional in their attitudes towards society⁴¹. One may hypothesize that more pressure against religion and church will turn away more people but it will also strengthen the commitment of those who stay on.

Percentagewise, however, the number of the actively committed ones in the East and in the West is by far more similar than the respective figures for membership as such. Approximately 10% of the church members in the East and 20% in the West may be counted in this category. This observation raises the question what percentage of a given population can be turned - under any circumstances - into actively committed church members. From a sociological point of view, one is tempted to say that the majority of the population opts for what, through ruling parties or public opinion, is presented as the majority option.

A more hopeful point comes to mind when we ask about reasons for not turning away from church and religion. It is remarkable that in both parts of Germany the so-called "conciliary process", the struggle for peace, justice and the integrity of the creation, has been a strong motive for young people's interest in religion. It is this commitment for the future where promising signs may be observed for German youth and for religion - in the East as well as in the West.

39 Schloz 1978.

40 See Henkys in this volume.

41 Eiben 1992, EKD 1993a, 23-40.

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