

Does Religious Individualization Lead to a Lack of Social Cohesion? A German Perspective

“We need human beings like those from the Protestant Church.” the former German Federal president Christian Wulff said in his words of welcome at the synod of the German Protestant Church 2010. We need them, he argued, because they are very important for the social cohesion of the German society¹ – an interesting statement on religious people in times of pluralization and individualization also on the religious field. Because, depending on whom you ask, several answers are possible to the question which effects individualization and especially religious individualization have on social cohesion. Following typical prejudices –another important factor for the social cohesion of a group, as Andreas Feige has shown in his paper – people from Western modern countries would say that they could not think of living in a society where the community is more important than the individual. Whoever says so does not reflect on the effects of individualization for social cohesion. People from Eastern or African countries would probably claim that individualization may directly lead to a lack of social cohesion and therefore they would opt for a communitarian order of society based on family relations. Taking religion into account as a factor makes this point even clearer.

There has been some research on the relation between individualization and social cohesion. Some of the fathers of sociology like Durkheim, Tönnies or Simmel have already shown that in post-industrial societies individualization does not necessarily lead to a decline of social relations, and if it does, not forcibly to a great extent. They argued that the term individualization does not mean a decline of social relations but growing freedom of creating and arranging one’s social relations. Establishing or breaking off social relations depends more on personal decisions. That means that existing social relations possess a higher intrinsic quality and are therefore more valuable for individuals because they are already there and need not to be created. Social relations are not the consequence of an existential need but of a free choice based on one’s own interests. A decline, though, can be seen in the phenomenon of “standard biographies” – with the exception of some closed communities in the context of migration.

¹ Word of welcome of the German Federal President Christian Wulff, Hannover, November 7th 2010, http://www.ekd.de/synode2010/media/video/grusswort_wulff.html, accessed 2010-11-17.

Also in the Western scientific community there are different points of view taken on this topic, namely by communitarians as Bellah and Putnam. They analyse a decline of public spirit, a lack of trust and engagement and at the same time a rise of mass-depression. But their empirical data is not very convincing, and surveys, e.g. the world-values-survey², show very well that these described processes cannot be generalized at all.

In our paper, we would like to add a look on the phenomenon of individualization, social cohesion and religion from a German perspective. In a first step, we are going to introduce some empirical data related to the questions, focusing on youth in Germany, their religious attitudes and opinions about social relations and values. Young people indicate the future of a society and are therefore an important object of research. We will then analyse the phenomena of individualization and social cohesion with regard to religion on a more reflectional level.

1. German youth, religion and social relations – empirical findings

How does German youth think about religion and social values? If religious individualization is an adequate characterisation of the religious field in a Western society like Germany, the youth must show these characteristics on a high degree. And if they do so, it is interesting to see how important social relations are in their opinion. We present some data from the European Survey on “Religious Diversity and Education in Europe (REDCo)” from 2009, the Shell Survey Youth 2010 and a research-project by Carsten Gennerich and Andreas Feige published in 2008.

1.1 REDCo

In a European Survey on “Religious Diversity and Education in Europe (REDCo)” students of eight European countries at the age of 14-16 were asked about their opinion about the role of religion in their daily life with special regard to dialogue and conflict. The results for Germany show very well that one cannot talk about a general decline of religion at all, but about religious individualization and a decline of the importance of religious institutions. It is no longer the reading of sacred texts or the attendance of religious events that characterizes religious attitudes of the German youth. More than 40% of the respondents agree that “You can be a religious person without belonging to a particular faith community”. Religion is more a quest than an answer: More than 70% do at least once a month think about religion and the meaning of life. Interesting for the question of the importance of social relations with references to religion is that the family is seen as the most important source for religious information,

² Cf. www.worldvaluessurvey.org.

followed by school and then the religious community one belongs to.³ In addition, 80% agree or strongly agree that one has to get an objective knowledge about different religions, and more than 60% consider it as important to learn about the importance of religion for dealing with problems in society. This indicates that religion is seen as an important factor concerning questions of societal development. Maybe that is the reason why more than 30% would neither say that religion belongs to private life or not⁴ – on the level of contents it belongs to the private life, but as a factor of society it cannot be faded out. The authors of the survey conclude: “It seems that irrespective of personal religious affiliation and of the role students assign to religion in their personal life, religion is a topic of discussions and regarded as a factor that is taken into account in social relationships: in the family, with friends, and in school.”⁵

1.2 The German Shell Holding: Youth 2010

One of the biggest empirical research projects on youth and also the mentioned issues is the Shell-survey that is conducted regularly in a period of about every two years. Here, we refer to the 16th youth survey, titled “Youth 2010”⁶. About 2600 young people between 12 and 25 years were asked in this representative sample in the beginning of 2010 about a very wide range of issues. One of these interesting issues is social values, the other one is religion.

Family orientation is – as in the results the years before – very important. 76% say one needs a family to be really happy. It is not only relevant for them to have a family of their own later on, but also the family of origin is seen as tremendously important, especially in the years of education and during the first steps into a career, on the way to become an adult. More than 90% claim to have a good relationship with their parents.⁷ 73% still live with their parents. In general, the close local relations are very important for the youth, besides the family partnerships and peer-groups are of great importance. 97% consider “to have friends who really accept one” as their most important value of life.

Besides the strong relation within the family and friends on a local level another sort of relations and social life is getting more and more important: social networks in the internet. 50% use the internet daily for communication within social networks like facebook, Lokalisten, Studi-VZ and others, 22% more at least once a week. Having a closer look at the social activities of the younger generation is interesting, too. Only 20% say that they never participate in social

³ Josza et al. 2009, 179f.

⁴ Josza et al. 2009, 196.

⁵ Josza et al. 2009, 205.

⁶ Shell Deutschland Holding GmbH 2010.

⁷ Vgl. Albert et al. 2010; Leven et al. 2010.

engagement, whereas 39% and by that a growing number in comparison to former surveys engages often. In many cases the motivation does not lie that much in political ambitions but in pragmatic decisions – the youth want to improve their own relations to people, widen their horizon, or do something on a local level. They do not fade out the societal dimension – 70% say one has at least on a basic level to be interested in the society.

Coming to the field of religion: The Shell-survey itself concludes that religion continues to play only a very marginal role in the lives of the youth, secularization is growing, especially in the Eastern parts of Germany religion does not play a role at all. Only within contexts of migration religion still plays a vital role, here the importance of God for everyday-life is seen as very important by 76%. The normal type is still the Western German type of religiosity, which undergoes a transformation, too. Especially for the catholic youth the importance of God for their life is declining (from 50% 2006 to now 44%). Many Christian young people from both great confessions do no longer regard God as a person but as a kind of a „thing“ or principle. The religious uncertainty, as the authors of the survey call it, is growing, from 23 to 27%.

These results are interesting, but on the other hand have to be read very critically, especially with regard to the conceptualization and operationalisation of religion. Because if one has a closer look, as Rolf Schieder has done,⁸ religion and believing in God is very important for the contentedness and confidence of the present German youth. The problems of conceptualization within the Shell-study are lying in the under-determined consideration of religious practice, esp. with regard to everyday-life, in the notion of faith and the concept of God.

The young people were asked for example what they would do when they are in difficulties. 14 items are proposed as answers of which no item explicitly refers to a transcendent dimension, although a very high percentage of the youth in Western Germany officially belongs to a religious community. A possible answer like “I pray” would be adequate – even if it were not chosen, this fact would allow deeper reflections about the role of religion within the younger generations.

Another critical point: For the Shell study, people are only considered to be religious when they agree to a personal god or at least to a concept of a god-like principle or power. The decline of the value of acceptance to these two items is interpreted in the study as a decline of religion. One might, on the contrary, also argue that this shows a high degree of uncertainty and the importance of religion as quest, but in no way a total absence of religion. These are characteris-

⁸ Schieder 2010.

tics of religious individualization, one might also say, not of a general decline of religion.

This is especially important on the background of the high degree of contentedness the young people show with their lives. Within the questions concerning values and contentedness, the answers to which show a high degree of self-assurance and life-confidence, one finds very interesting data: Among the subjective indicators for contentedness are – following the rank-order – the ability to face problems with humour; effort and ambition; a believe in God, a positive atmosphere of conversation within the family; the acceptance of law and order; to know one's own way; the ability to party; the willingness to care for others; and to do something that makes fun.⁹ So believing in God is the third important factor to be content in life. As one takes into account that in all monotheistic religions, believe in God always implies to love the other, it is also possible to see the importance of the family, of law and order and of solidarity indicate the acceptance of the values of these religions.

With regard to the importance of social relations the question concerning the most important aims in life is relevant, too. Here, the item "You need people around you in your life whom you can absolutely trust" gets the highest affirmation with 95%. This corresponds very much with the already mentioned results and also with the last survey we would like to present briefly.

1.3 Religious values: the study of Feige/Gennerich

To what extent social values, the importance of social relations esp. to family members are relevant for young people in Germany, and how it is possible to link this to religion, is demonstrated by the research of Andreas Feige and Carsten Gennerich.¹⁰ With their very differentiated and elaborated tools the authors are able to show that among the students they have been asking the concept of sin is in a very high degree related to failures concerning the intimate relations of trust to other people, especially family members. They have asked about 8000 students from 16 to 24 years old, trying to find their reflexive self-perceptions which are regarded as realisations of cultural-religious programmatic. Within their survey the question "What shall be valid?" is asked in many perspectives, and what can be seen in the results is that there is an intensive desideratum among the youth for "social security and trust", aiming especially at the quality of relations, differentiated in the aspects of stability of interaction, reliability of expectations, and minimization of the risk of relations. The [invasion] breakdown of trust in a relation and the lack of stability can be characterized as sin, as the authors interpret. A second finding of interest is that also the

⁹ Gensicke 2010, 240.

¹⁰ Feige, Gennerich 2008. A summary can be found in Feige 2008.

question concerning the meaning of life is primarily answered in relation to social activities. Most of the students do agree that meaning of life is something which has to be created by oneself, but that they experience the meaning of life primarily through “people I like and who like me” – which can also be read as an indicator for the insight that one’s own being is based on a transcendent precondition.¹¹ These two examples may be sufficient to indicate a strong relation between a high estimation of social bonds and current, individualized forms of religion.

1.4 Concluding remarks

Of course, one has to analyse all these findings in a much more differentiated way to be really able to give an adequate picture. I mentioned only some and for the sake of the argument helpful figures. But I think that a general trend can be seen as far as social relations and as their consequence social cohesion are important even in a context of general and especially religious individualization – taking into account that one needs to have an appropriate definition of religion. This is of course a chicken-and-egg-question. Is the high importance of social relations and values among the youth a reaction to the experienced lack of social cohesion or a result of the high degree of existing social cohesion? The high level of contentedness of the youth from the Shell-study might indicate an appropriate answer. At least it shows that it is very well possible to combine religious individualization with the importance of social relations and social values. How is this relation of social cohesion and individualized religion to be thought on a more reflective level with regard to the characteristics of a modern pluralistic and functional differentiated society?

2. Religion and social cohesion in a pluralistic, functional differentiated society

Referring to the results presented above reflecting some of the new surveys regarding the religious and social attitudes of the young generation in Germany one can say: there is indeed a religious individualization but at the same time no decline on the emphasis given to social relations. The majority of young people have religious interests. At least in the Western part of Germany they also belong to a church or a religious community. Nevertheless, young people are religious individualists. Their religious beliefs and statements rarely correspond with those of the church they belong to in terms of formal membership. But that is obviously without negative consequences for their sense of the importance of functioning social relations. The family, the friends and the peer group are of high importance to them in order to lead a good life. We can also recognize a sense of the unconditional dimension of life although there is no

¹¹ Feige 2008, 226.

familiarity with the traditional churchy language to express this religious feeling. To have a good family, good friends and also a good partnership constitutes the fulfillment of life. The hopes regarding one's own future also go into this direction.

There are no significant signs that religious individualism leads to a lack of social cohesion. How can we interpret this result of the recent youth surveys?

In our view, the first answer can be found within the structure of modern western functional differentiated societies on the one hand and their religious pluralistic situation on the other hand. This societal structure is expanding according to the process of globalization. So we are confronted with functional differentiation and religious pluralism all over the world. Both factors work together and one of the consequences is that religious communities cannot play the integrative role they used to have within the society. In general, the society is not integrated any more on the basis of common religious and moral values. Churches or religious communities which want to contribute to the social coherence experience that there are different value systems and different religious traditions, often in struggle with each other. So they can contribute to the integration of the society only within the borders of their own system of values. Many feel the necessity to acknowledge the legitimate right of the values of other cultural and religious systems. People need what we call "interreligious competence".

In addition we have to notice that the functional differentiation of modern societies shows us a societal situation in which a value-based integration of the society is not useful any more. In a functional differentiated society each person has to fulfill different societal roles. Everyone is confronted with different social expectations and obligations. Each person is integrated in different societal systems and has to adjust to their different value systems. Individuals have to switch to other value systems as they move between the different spheres of society, e.g. the economic system and the political system, as it is also the case when they come together in a church or a faith based organization. A child in a family, a student at school, a consumer at the market, a member in a Christian community, they all have to adjust to different systems, each of which includes a different set of values and roles.

Regarding the different societal systems there is to say that they don't need a common value basis. Although lacking a normative basis, there are a lot of functional interdependences between the societal systems. It is enough that they cooperate on the basis of their different specialized functions. Nevertheless, in the perspective of the people there is still a need of integration and identity. Each individual has to bring together by their own effort the different roles which she or he plays in the different societal spheres. Religious communities

are therefore no longer obliged to hold the society together. Even if they try to do so they are going to fail. They are neither expected to fulfill an integrative function, nor is this possible at all. But they can become important factors for people searching their personal identity. In religious communities people may find answers to their quest of meaning and they can reach a deeper self-understanding. One can say: In modern pluralistic and functional differentiated societies the religious communities do not hold the society together but the individual does. Religious communities with their symbols and rituals are still necessary because also in modern pluralistic and functional differentiated societies persons are confronted with life experiences producing religious feelings and provoking religious communication.

By now, in the search for meaning and in the confrontation with the ultimate dimension of life, religious communities still have a function which cannot be replaced by other societal systems or other societal organizations. By symbolizing a transcendent reality religious communities fulfill their specific religious function. With their rituals they realize the contact to this transcendent dimension. People who are divided between their different societal functions and who are confronted with different value systems may find in a religious community a symbolic space in which they are free to find their personal identity and their own personal answers about the destination of their life.

This resistant function of religion and religious communities in modern societies emerges obviously with global religious transformations. This could explain why the world religions receive new attention and importance worldwide after having lost their integrative societal power, which in early modernity was realized in combination with nationalism, with fascist or communist ideologies. The churches and religious communities and also the faith based organizations become important now, in the late modernity, because they create a protective space in which people can find for themselves a sustainable support in their search of meaning and for their social engagement in the civil society.

In opposite to former traditional societies in which people were involved in religious traditions and communities, and later in the different totalitarian ideologies, in the second half of the 20th century modern functional differentiated and pluralistic societies have produced an individualistic type of religious belonging. But religious affiliations still depend on individual religious interests, on the search for meaning, identity and social contact. People are not necessarily integrated into a religious community. But they come in contact with a religious community, depending on the importance they attach to finding a space for religious experiences, reflections and community.

Depending on their motivation to become an active member of a religious group they will also find religious communities and rituals enabling them to

come in contact with the transcendent dimension of life. This is one of the strongest consequences of religious individualization with which the churches and all religious communities in modern societies are confronted. Individualization describes today a religious situation in which people can decide by themselves if they need a more or less active religious relationship. They have the opportunity to decide whether they want to belong to a religious community or not, and to which extent they want to engage themselves. Individualization does not mean that people are left alone with the quest of their life conduct. We must not confuse individualization with egoism and solipsism. Individualization is the dominant form of being religious in the pluralistic and functional differentiated globalized world. But that does not mean that people have no social contacts motivated by religion or that religion does not contribute to social cohesion any more.

Nevertheless the societal statuses of the religious community and also the form in which people are affiliated with it have changed. It is in this regard very important to take into account the different cultural and societal context. When people are confronted with social disintegration it can become highly important for them to find contact to a religious community in order to come into closer personal contact with a social supportive environment and to be involved in community life. In this community they can put their trust and find the empowerment enabling them to cope with their difficult social situation especially in the case of poverty. If people have lost their integration within their local community, their family, neighbors and friends they feel especially the need to find a helpful community. Then a religious community can become an open and transcendent space for them because its borders are intentionally not defined through the lines of one of the societal social spheres. Unfortunately in the reality often they are divided in accordance to these lines, too. But in situations of distress religious communities can make a strong contribution to the formation of social capital. They offer space within the society which opens the dimension of transcendence, a space which is transcendent to all the different functions, obligations and disappointments within the society.

It seems to me that in a society like South Africa the achievement of religious communities in social capital formation depends on the realization of a community transcending the social relations of family, neighborhood, friendship, and so on. It is important that the religious community integrate people in a social context in which they find a space expressing their belief and conveying a common spirit enabling them to fight together against a situation of poverty and oppression.

Regarding the different societal and cultural situation in Europe it is obvious that the role of religious communities is quite different here. They are not such an important factor for social integration and for the struggle in human right

issues. But religious communities and their ritual and symbolic communication also constitute an open space in which people find the chance to reflect the central and deepest questions of life. We can observe too that in situations of social disintegration, of sickness and social transgression people feel the necessity for pastoral care, for religious rituals and the actualization of their church membership. In such situation the churches give people the feeling of being integrated into a large and worldwide community of believers. By doing so the churches enable people to deal better with difficult life situations.

In conclusion we can say that religious individualization indeed does not lead to a lack of social cohesion. The opposite is true. Although we have to do with religious individualization – that means, with a religious situation in which individuals are free to decide about their religious belongings – people still recognize that religious communities offer open spaces transcending the differences within the society and empowering them to live the experience of our vulnerable and finite existence.

The intensity and the forms in which religious communities contribute to social capital formation and social cohesion depend on the social structure of the society. In a society with a strong social network like in most European countries the formation of social capital produced by the religious communities does not have to be realized to such a great extent in the field of social development. In Europe, contributions to social development issues were a main challenge during the period of the first industrialization in the 19th century. At that time the “Diakonische Werk” was founded.

Today we recognize that the formation of social capital produced by the churches lies more in the field of supporting religious and spiritual developments. Churches have to create symbolic and ritual spaces in which people can find suggestions for the development of their personal spiritual life. They need to offer interpretations of life which help people to develop by themselves a deeper self-understanding and a helpful life orientation.

Strengthening the individual in his or her personal identity and self-understanding is also a contribution to social cohesion and social capital formation. The individual becomes confident about his or her own life perspective and is able to maintain helpful and trusty personal relationships. But if people understand the space of transcendence right, the religious dimension also opens up a universal perspective. The obligation of the religious community is not determined by the limits of one’s own religious group. In a Christian perspective it is the religious space which gives each human being an infinite worth. Today the affirmation of human dignity is the special contribution the Christian community can make to social capital formation.

As it reflects the pluralistic situation of modern societies, this universal perspective becomes more and more the main challenge for the religious contributions to social cohesion and social capital formation. How is a deeper religious self-understanding and spiritual engagement compatible with the acknowledgment of other religious traditions and communities? We would suggest that in the future this is going to be the most important challenge the churches will be faced with even by fulfilling their function of contributing to social cohesion and social capital formation.

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