

## Workshop

# “Differentiation Theory and the Sociology of Religion and Secularity”

KFG “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities”

Leipzig University, 8/9 October 2020

Seminar building (Universitätsstraße), Room S 202 and zoom

Convenors: Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (Leipzig University), Christoph Kleine (Leipzig University),  
and Daniel Witte (University of Bonn)

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### 1 Schedule

#### 8 October 2020

- 12:30–14:00** Welcome, Registration, Joint Lunch
- 14:00–15:30** Opening Session  
**Monika Wohlrab-Sahr** (Leipzig University) / **Christoph Kleine** (Leipzig University)
- 15:45–17:15** **Thomas Kern** (University of Bamberg)  
*Why We Need a Theory of Social Differentiation*  
**Hartmann Tyrell** (Bielefeld University) / **Raf Vanderstraeten** (Universiteit Gent)  
*Some reflections on the uses of differentiation theory for the sociology of religion and secularity*  
Moderation: Hubert Seiwert (Leipzig University)
- 17:45–19:15** **Sudipta Kaviraj** (Columbia University)  
*Disenchantment and secularization*  
**Adrian Hermann** (Bonn University)  
*Global History of Religion and Differentiation Theory*  
Moderation: Nur Yasemin Ural (Leipzig University)
- 19:30–20:00** Closing Discussion Day 1

## 9. October 2020

**12:30–14:00** Joint Lunch

**14:00–15:30** **Gesa Lindemann** (University of Oldenburg)  
*Religion and social differentiation*

**Detlef Pollack** (University of Münster)  
*The presumed origins of functional differentiation in Western Europe*

Moderation: Wolfgang Höpken (Leipzig University)

**15:45–17:15** **Sita Steckel** (University of Münster)  
*Differentiation theory and historical secularities: A perspective from the European past*

**Phil Gorski** (Yale University)  
*Secularization of the World OR Fragmentation of the Sacred?*

Moderation: Florian Zemmin (Leipzig University)

**17:45–19:45** Closing Discussion Day 2

## 2 Approach

### 2.1 Differentiation Theory and Sociology of Religion

Differentiation theory has always been closely related to the sociology of religion, both with regard to the historical development of societies and with respect to the genealogy of the theory itself. On the one hand, important contributions such as the ones of Weber and Bourdieu, for instance, were developed from the womb of their respective sociologies of religion. In Luhmann's account, on the other hand, religion is likewise depicted as the first social system that differentiated from its environment historically. Further, this also connects to the other side of the secular-religious distinction, since – according to his theory – it was also the religious system that at first perceived its non-religious environment as 'secular', whereas it was only later that the religious-secular distinction became crucial from a perspective outside of religion. In a broader sense, differentiation theory also played an important (and more and more contested) role in the context of modernisation and secularisation theories. Modern societies – from that perspective – are inherently also functionally differentiated, and characterised to a greater or lesser extent by secularisation and the dominance of secular institutions. In short, while the theory of differentiation forms an integral component of modernisation theory, 'secularisation', in turn, arguably constitutes its most important special case.

Whereas, for a long time, the assumption of functional differentiation seemed a valid element in diagnoses of modernisation and secularisation, it became more and more contested over the course of the last years. It was first of all Talal Asad, but with him and independent from him many other scholars, who questioned either the applicability of differentiation theory to non-Western contexts, or criticised the concomitant interpretation of differentiation as a more or less autonomous process in the course of modernisation. However, criticisms related to differentiation diagnoses also came from the side of

sociological theory. These criticisms aimed – among others – at differentiation theory’s lack of explanatory power, its inability to properly account for the role of social inequalities and conflicts, and its neglect of agency and carrier-groups (not least those that are considered crucial for processes of differentiation themselves).

## 2.2 Multiple Secularities

In our research group on Multiple Secularities, we have tried to contribute to the debate on secularisation, starting from the perspective of societal differentiation. Secularisation theory has been criticised for its undue generalisation of European modernisation experiences and their link to secularisation processes; a lack of historical depth, and the use of the secular-religious binary as an analytical tool for research. While we acknowledge these serious shortcomings, we argue that there is a fundamental aspect of the theory that can serve as a *tertium comparationis* in historical-sociological research on religion and its relation to its environment. That aspect is the *differentiation between religious and non-religious spheres of activity and domains of power*, or more precisely—which is crucial when we are dealing with premodern non-Western societies—a *mode of conceptual distinction according to which social differentiation is cast into a binary taxonomy that serves specific classificatory purposes*.

Whereas in our previous research we have – from a cultural sociological perspective – suggested a mapping of different types of secularity that exist in different world regions within and outside of Europe and are related to characteristic reference problems and communicated in relation to certain guiding ideas,<sup>1</sup> in our present work we have given this a historical turn. We try to outline a research agenda that aims at the historicisation of *conceptual distinctions and institutional differentiations* between the religious and the secular.<sup>2</sup> We employ the heuristic concept of ‘secularity’ to refer to interrelated epistemic and social structures in which given social configurations are conceptually cast into a binary taxonomy and endeavour to genealogically trace back the secular-religious binary beyond its linguistic representation in modern contexts.

Thereby we also try to bridge the gap between two polar positions that have emerged within the academic study of religion and related disciplines. These positions can – in an ideal-typical way – be described as follows: one approach emphasises the historicity and specificity of ‘religion’ and related categories, like ‘the secular’, that emerged in Europe and spread globally in the course of colonialism, and sees their scholarly use as a continuation of colonial or imperialist aspirations for power. The other approach, however, emphasises both the legitimacy and necessity of using meta-language concepts for the comparison of Western and non-Western, and even modern and premodern cultures. We see the bridging between these poles as necessary for stimulating new research, which is not limited to ‘the West’ and its concepts and yet takes the insights of post-colonial perspectives into account. The task we set

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<sup>1</sup> Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Marian Burchardt, “Multiple Secularities: Toward a Cultural Sociology of Secular Modernities,” *Comparative Sociology* 11, no. 6 (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Christoph Kleine and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, “Comparative Secularities: Tracing Social and Epistemic Structures Beyond the Modern West,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* (2020, forthcoming); Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Christoph Kleine, “Historicizing Secularity: A Proposal for Comparative Research from a Global Perspective.” 2020, under review.

ourselves is: how can historical research about non-European and premodern cultures continue to yield information that is interesting for religious studies and sociology as a whole without presupposing the universality of religion as a given reality or even as a useful concept for cultural comparison? Starting from a perspective informed by differentiation theory, we intend to show that genealogy and comparison, historicisation and generalisation can mutually fertilise each other. We assume that the diversity of secular-religious relations in the world today is caused by the varying epistemic and social conditions and preconditions under which different societies have historically appropriated Western models of secularism. Without anachronistically applying or projecting predefined comparative concepts such as 'religion' or 'the secular', we nevertheless argue that certain forms of conceptual distinction and social differentiation have either been used as resources or could be adapted along the lines of Western differentiation logics because of structural analogies and/or functional equivalence. We thus explicitly disagree with scholarly positions that question the suitability of the secular-religious binary for non-Western contexts.

Accordingly, we have started to investigate these endogenous forms of conceptual distinction and social differentiation and their impact on the ways in which Western knowledge regimes—including the religious-secular divide—and institutional arrangements—including the legal and organisational separation of 'state' and 'church'—were appropriated in colonial or quasi-colonial situations. This rationale follows the main argument in Shmuel Eisenstadt's "multiple modernities" approach,<sup>3</sup> which takes both cultural specificities *and* the influence of Western modernity into account to explain the different paths that modernity has taken in the world. Accordingly, we operationalise the concept of 'secularity', and thereby try to pave the way for a historical explanation of the multiplicity of secularities in global modernity.

Next to various contributions of our research fellows on different regions in Asia and the Islamic world, we have approached this exemplarily with reference to two different religious and societal settings in the medieval period—Japanese Buddhism and Islam in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> We have argued that forms of distinction and differentiation existed from early on, which, under certain conditions, could *later* be related to the secular-religious binary by social actors.

We have identified distinctions on the conceptual level, the development of oppositional pairs, as well as differentiations on the institutional level, pushed forward by institutional (religious) actors interested in granting their own autonomy:

- a) On the conceptual level, we find the identification of certain activities and groups under the label 'religion' (*kyō*, *dō*, *hō*, *shūshi*, *monto* or *din*). We can see this in situations of life-world comparisons and competition between different ideological groups, indicated, for example, by cases of conversion between these groups, by comparisons between competing socio-cultural formations and normative systems, or by the juxtaposition of 'good' and 'bad' *kyō* or *din*. This indicates that a notion of a unity of certain phenomena existed in pre-modern Japanese

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<sup>3</sup> Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus*, 129/1 (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr, "Comparative Secularities;" Wohlrab-Sahr and Kleine, "Historicizing Secularity."

Buddhism as well as in pre-modern Islam. We would interpret this as the *conceptual distinction of a social field* that would later become religion.

- b) Again, on the conceptual level, we find the development of oppositional pairs (*ōbō – buppō; din – dunya*) in which two spheres of power were juxtaposed and put in relation to each other. In the cases discussed, these were the nomosphere of the emperor and the nomosphere of the Buddha (in Japan) or the realm of political and of religious authority, of temporal and religious knowledge as well as of religious and non-religious jurisdiction (in medieval Islam). This semantic distinction of a supra-mundane from a mundane nomosphere, we argue, supported the development of a distinct sphere of activity, first of all next to the political (and parts of the juridical) sphere, but also in comparison with other types of knowledge. We interpret this as the *development of a conceptual binary* that supported institutional autonomy.
- c) What we see in the Buddhist case, is the attempt of monastic organisations to secure their institutional autonomy from the state. We interpret this as a process of *institutional differentiation* of a social sphere later to be defined as 'religion'. In the case of medieval Islam, it is the differentiation of the '*ulama*' as an independent locus of authority, which defined the reach of *shar'ia* and the borders to the outside world. It certainly does not develop the institutional strength and autonomy of the Catholic Church, but it nevertheless has effects on the establishment of politics and religion as distinct, however closely related, spheres. Religious institutions (monasteries, *ulama*) are obviously important actors that promote differentiation due to certain interests.

Considering the problem of data in historical research, it is not always easy to tell which step came first: whether the semantic distinction preceded the institutional differentiation or vice versa. Referring to Max Weber, one might conclude, that it is the interplay between ideas and interests,<sup>5</sup> between conceptual distinctions and institutional autonomy that leads to the juxtaposition of religious and political spheres. Our argument is that this can be interpreted as a resource for secularity, on which later secular-religious distinctions could build.

That this is not a unilinear story can also be seen in the comparison of the histories of Middle Eastern Islam and Japanese Buddhism. Different modes of confrontation with Western modernity and the varieties of colonial/quasi-colonial domination come into play as important influencing factors. However, even if the reality of differentiations in the present is different in different regions, it seems important to recognise that there have been commonalities in terms of religion-related distinctions and differentiations that must be taken into account in order to avoid simply projecting the present onto the past. The story we tell differs depending on whether we assume that Islam prevented the religious-secular demarcation from developing, or we acknowledge commonalities in the past, and then ask why history nevertheless developed differently.

It is also obvious, that – with regard to later developments – important steps are still waiting to be taken. It is especially the question of *which paths* develop in the course of history, and what the critical

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<sup>5</sup> Max Weber, "Einleitung in die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie I.*, ed. Marianne Weber (Tübingen: Mohr 1988), 252.

events are that influence their direction. What is the role of cultural and political encounters, not only, but especially in the colonial period? What is the role of political and cultural power in the course of these events? Who are the actors (individuals, groups, and networks) that promote certain developments? To which societal problems are certain actions and measures related and how are these actions communicated?

## 2.3 Selected Publications of the Participants

- Casanova, José. "Secularization Revisited: A Reply to Talal Asad." In *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors*. Edited by David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, 12–30. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.
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- Hermann, Adrian. *Unterscheidungen der Religion: Analysen zum globalen Religionsdiskurs und dem Problem der Differenzierung von 'Religion' in buddhistischen Kontexten des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015.
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- Kern, Thomas, and Uwe Schimank. "Megakirchen als religiöse Organisationen: Ein dritter Gemeindetyp jenseits von Sekte und Kirche?" *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 65, S1 (2013): 285–309. doi:10.1007/s11577-013-0227-4.



- Kern, Thomas. "Inequality, Inclusion, and Protest: Jeffrey Alexander's Theory of the Civil Sphere." In *Social Theory and Social Movements*. Edited by Jochen Roose and Hella Dietz, 93–111. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2016.
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