Generation and secularisation in Germany: the succession of generations up to the youngest adult generation and the advancing process of secularisation

Franzmann, Manuel

Manuel Franzmann   (Frankfurt am Main, 2005)

Generation and Secularisation in *Germany*. The succession of generations up to the youngest adult generation and the advancing process of secularisation.[1]

1. Introduction

When one considers the results of social scientific surveys, secularisation in *Germany* seems to be a more or less linear process of erosion of what is traditionally named religiosity. The percentage of citizens who affirm that they are "religious", believe in God or otherworldly beings, hope for life after death or participate regularly in the praxis of a religious community has been – by and large – steadily declining for decades. This decline has occurred over the succeeding generations: The younger the generation, the fewer "religious" people in it.[2]

But the process of secularisation is apparent not only in this persistent *quantitative* shrinkage from generation to generation. Above all it also manifests itself – this is my thesis – in the transformation of the *habitus formations* and *contents of faith* of the generations. The essence of ongoing secularisation naturally is reflected most clearly in its contemporary state of development which is represented in the youngest adult generation. Therefore the analysis of this generation is particularly interesting for the sociology of religion.

But I will not confine this paper to this generation. After indicating some basic premises of the sociology of generations and the notion of secularisation I presuppose in this paper, I will try to outline hypothetically the succession of generations in Germany, from the so-called generation of ´68 to the youngest adult generation, concluding with some remarks about the progress of secularisation. The empirical basis of my argument is provided by case reconstructions of interviews and group discussions undertaken by a group of sociologists in Germany I belong to according to the methodological principles of *Ulrich Oevermann's Objective Hermeneutics*.[3] Of course the presentation of these case reconstructions is not possible in this short article. Regrettably such a presentation does not exist in other publications at this moment, which is without a doubt a serious deficiency. Without a detailed derivation from case reconstructions, the following outline of the succession of generations remains without demanding empirical proof. Nevertheless, as hypothetical outline it turns our

attention to an aspect of the succession of generations, which has found little consideration thus far in sociological research.

2. Premises concerning the sociology of generations

Now, a few words about my assumptions in the sociology of generations. In this paper I use the notion "generation" only in the sense of a distinguishable age cohort which shows a specific "character" and cultural orientation and not in the sense of the three generations in a family. Each generation has a specific habitus formation and specific contents of faith (or specific "probation myths" to use *Oevermann's* terminology[4]). It is a historical type. According to *Oevermann*[5] and drawing upon *Mannheim*[6], I suppose that a generation is shaped in reaction to the historical situation of a specific political community and that the adolescents of this community become a generation through the socialisation process that is framed and affected by historical circumstances. The socialisation process I regard with *Oevermann*[7] as structured by a succession of "separation crises": birth, the end of the primary, post-natal, mother-child symbiosis, the end of the "Oedipus complex" and finally adolescence. The historical situation has a bearing on the formation of the subjects of a specific age cohort in the course of these universal separation crises. Certainly the most important separation crisis in the emergence of a generation is adolescence, when they have to develop a concept of life which establishes them as independent adults and gives meaning to their life as part of the life of their community and humankind. In order to shape their concept of life they have to open up to the politico-social situation of the time. This is subsequently engraven in their way of thinking and acting and determines both for the rest of their lives after they finally leave the social moratorium of adolescence and enter the "time of probation" (*Oevermann*) in which they have to trust their acquired life concept. As members of the occupied adult generations they can revise and adjust their original life concepts to the transforming societal situation only to a limited extent, whereas the life concepts of adolescents downright "originate" from the actual societal constellation. So much for the sociology of generations.

3. The concept of secularisation

Now, very briefly, some remarks on the concept of secularisation I assume in this paper. I regard the process of secularisation as an unavoidable and in a sense logical consequence of *Weber's* universal-historic dynamics of rationalisation which thrives in the *Judaeo-Christian*

religious tradition. I conceive it in *Weber's* terms as a process whereby the life conduct becomes ever more disenchanted, rationalised and methodical. That the contents of faith that guide one's life conduct become ever more *worldly* is implicit in this approach!

Furthermore, I tie in with *Oevermann's* "structural model of religiosity"[8], which supplies a structuralist-pragmatist explanation for the dynamics of rationalisation and secularisation *Weber* analysed and is therefore a crucial enhancement to *Weber's* approach. With *Oevermann's* structural model of religiosity, which I unfortunately cannot present in this short article, one can demonstrate that the secularisation process materially refers to the *potential for autonomy*[9] that distinguishes human life. The process of secularisation consists in the ever more elaborate articulation of this autonomy potential in the myths of provenance and probation that guide life conduct. Thus the secularisation process is to be understood not only formally, as the substitution of religious with secular contents of the life conduct, but also as a material process directed at the realisation of the autonomy potential.[10] In it the search for answers to the three universal mythical questions "Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?" is given over to the Individual. Trusting in God and his earthly "representatives" who were considered as delivering these answers to the Individual is replaced by trusting oneself. However, this development only really becomes evident in the industrialised world in the second half of the 20th century, when the life conduct of the Individual becomes progressively detraditionalised, as – in the sixties – traditional bonds were fundamentally questioned. Secularisation is thus a lengthy gradated historical process. Firstly there was the secularisation of intellectual discourse in the *Enlightenment*. Then came the practical secularisation for the basis of legitimate rule in the *French Revolution*. In this transition from the doctrine of divine right to the sovereignty of the people, the potential for autonomy was realised only in the most general sense. Its realisation in the details of the praxis of the nation state, including individual life conduct, has not yet been completed and probably never will be. And a further major step would and probably will be the introduction of a sufficient and unconditional basic income for every citizen, i.e. irrespective of any income from other sources and of age, without requiring the performance of any work or the willingness to accept a job if offered. A basic income once more would expand enormously the autonomy of the Individual. It would mean the valediction from the still collectively binding and therein religious *work ethics* and the enabling of a meaningful positive life without paid work. It would thereby resolve the persistent crisis of the "working society" and would lay a stable

foundation for the frequently discussed "knowledge society". So much for the concept of secularisation.

4. The succession of generations since the 1960s

I will now try to outline very briefly the succession of generations in *Germany* over the last fifty years. In so doing I confine myself to the peculiarities of the different generations, particularly those relevant to secularisation, and exclude the different historical situations that constitute the background of those peculiarities. Naturally the boundaries of the age cohort of a generation are not sharp and their determination could only be rough.

(1) I start the outline with the *"generation of '68"*, because in this generation traditional bonds were programmatically and principally questioned, which constitutes a fundamental break in regard to secularisation. Thereafter Individuals could no longer hold onto traditional bonds in an unbroken and taken-for-granted form. *David Riesman* has analysed the beginning of this transformation in the *USA* after the Second World War as a transition from the "inner-directed" to the "other-directed character".[11] The *German generation of '68*, which comprises those born between 1945 and 1952, is the first generation in which the older principle-guided "inner-directed character" has an outsider status and in which the "other-directed character" dominates. Henceforth other-direction was a general premise for the formation of generations. The departure in principle from traditional bonds posed the following problem for individual life conduct: the three universal mythical questions "Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?" had to be answered autonomously and not through religious tradition. This required a great deal of self-confidence and "ego-capability" ("Ich-Leistung", *Freud*) and demanded an understanding of the problems of the autonomous life conduct. But these requirements were lacking in the beginning and first had to be developed. It is my thesis that this process extends over the succession of generations from the *generation of '68* to the youngest adult generation. I would like to sketch this now.

One characteristic of the *generation of '68* was the symbolic violation of rules. In a sense the main concern of this generation was to destroy the old, i.e. traditionality. The principle-guided, inner-directed character was provoked at every turn and with great success. But with regard to the new, i.e. an autonomous life conduct, it was overwhelmed, because in this respect this generation was a generation of beginners and dilettantes who underestimated the

intricacies of such a life conduct. Instead of really autonomous answers to the three universal mythical questions, i.e. *individuated* concepts of life, the generation continued to orient itself towards collectively binding world views. It typically took refuge in secularist ideologies of *Marxist* provenance with revolutionary, emancipatory aims which replaced the criticised religion and tradition as collective orientation and were obviously a modernist *surrogate religion*.[12] Religious authorities were substituted with the authority of science, in particular sociology. In fact this was equivalent to a technocratic blurring of the boundary between theory and practice and imposed on the social sciences the role of the supplier of a (secular) meaning of life which they cannot fulfil. Autonomous life conduct remained widely an abstract idea.

(2) The following generation, born approximately between 1952 and 1960, then sought to systematically realise the collectivist-ideological program of emancipation the *generation of '68* proclaimed – whereas the *generation of '68* largely left disjointed provocative and symbolic actions without strategy or "master plan". One aspect of this was a certain sympathy with the left-wing terrorists of the 1970s who were admired for their practical consistency and their strategic approach in the pursuit of emancipation.

(3) The next generation then turned away from the "top-heavy" ideological orientation of its two predecessor generations and particularly from the strategic approach of a collective revolutionary action. It continued to feel bound to the collectivist program of general emancipation, but the strategic means now paradoxically focused on the Individual and his "consciousness". The approach was to emancipate society through the "transformation of consciousness" and the "quest for meaning" that every Individual had to perform by him/herself. The slogan "grassroots revolution" is emblematic. With *Oevermann* I call this generation, born between approximately 1960 to 1967, the "crisis of meaning generation". In its search for meaning it consequently was interested in everything that promised "self experience" and greater "self awareness". This generation is the bearer of the esoteric boom of the 1980s and 1990s, of the so called psycho wave, of the interest in meditative religions of the Far East, of the ecological movement, of *New Age* and other forms of so-called new religious movements. Some colleagues misinterpreted these phenomena as a "return to religiosity" and a refutation of the secularisation thesis. In fact this generation has only discarded the ideological *secularism* of its two predecessor generations which was itself religious in its claim for collective validity.[13] In the search for meaning this generation has

opened itself up to *the whole spectrum* of traditions and offers of ultimate meaning, religious *as well as* secular.

Its reception of these traditions normally was eclectic and based on the premise that not a religious authority but the autonomous Individual decides which contents to adopt for his or her life conduct. A restriction of this autonomy, however, lies in the fact that these contents were not *created* autonomously, out of the normal life praxis according to the authentic experiences made in this praxis. Rather it continuously adopted these contents from outside sources of meaning and from artificial "self experiences" that were sought outside the real life praxis where the "self" easily implodes into a blank abstraction. Only the question, which of the available, already existing contents will be adopted and combined to a personal *patchwork* myth, was answered autonomously. A consequence of this restricted mode of autonomy was that such a probation myth and life concept lacks inner coherence, plausibility and authenticity. It was not a product of the individual life praxis in the way the former collective religions and myths had consistently grown out of the collective life praxis of a particular community over the course of its history.

In contemporary sociology of religion great difficulties exist in adequately analysing this form of "patchwork religiosity" with its restricted mode of autonomy. Often this restriction of autonomy is completely ignored as already in *Luckmann's* theory of modern religion and its "privatisation". In this over thirty-years-old, but still very influential social-constructionist approach the autonomy of the modern Individual is conceptualised as free (consumer) choice from a broad palette of ultimate meanings offered by tradition and religious entrepreneurs. Little thought is given to the possibility of an Individual that *creates* his contents of life *autonomously* and consistently according to his biographical experiences. But strictly speaking, such an approach remains largely a *description* or *paraphrase* of "patchwork religiosity" and does not allow for its substantial, instructive *analysis*. Rather, it results in blindness to the analytically important question of inner coherence, plausibility, authenticity and "persuasiveness" of the particular contents of faith, as if these contents and their plausibility would be irrelevant or insignificant to the sociological analysis of religion. But not only for the religious Individual are these contents and their credibility essential. Also for the sociological analysis of religion these contents and their inner structure stand in the very centre, as *Weber* has demonstrated in his famous analysis of protestant ethics. Not only external causes bring about a religious transformation, but also the internal problems of faith propels such a transformation and consequently also a transformation of society. In the case

of modern "patchwork religiosity" it is primarily the problem of authenticity and the lack of coherence which drives a further transformation.

(4) The following generation corresponds to *Douglas Coupland's US-American "Generation X"*.[14] Born between approximately 1967 and 1975, this generation has given up its predecessors' collectivist program of general emancipation and developed a culture of downright avoidance of collectivist idealism which appears as a negative-pattern. The name *"Generation X"* that was used for this Generation in the *German* feuilletons for a certain time expresses this effort of evading identification and particular predicates, so that this effort paradoxically became itself a predicate. The Generation typically kept away from idealistic objectives with a forced tendency towards irony and the pursuit of its private interests *with ostentation*. It cultivated a lifestyle of being smart, of using marketing techniques to advance private interests and of being consumption and "fun" oriented. This negation of collective idealism through the accentuated pursuit of private interests undoubtedly meant a further step towards an autonomous life conduct, because it paved the way for an autonomous practice of making a living, of standing on one's own feet. But it also included the limitation of the autonomous life conduct to self-reproduction. Naturally self-reproduction as such does not suffice to furnish life with meaning. The meaning of a human life is only realised in its contribution to others, to the community and to humankind. Thus the problem of autonomously giving meaning to life remained unresolved. In face of this, it isn't surprising that this generation in general shied away from responsibility to family, society or politics.

5. The youngest adult generation

(5) Now to the youngest adult generation, born since 1975.[15] Naturally, we know less about this generation.[16] It is almost strikingly inconspicuous and unobtrusive. It is success- and achievement-oriented like its predecessor generation. But obviously it interprets success not only in terms of the pursuit of private interests, but in terms of "idealistic" criteria as well. Because it would seem to engage once more with idealistic, "positive" issues, the expression *Generation X* is no longer appropriate for it. But in contrast to previous idealistic generations, that shared common values and aims, the idealism of the youngest adult generation is apparently entirely individual as well as sobered. To all appearances it results concretely from biography, from autonomously answering the basic mythical questions "Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going?" in a consistent manner. Thus individuals in this generation

seem to be directed to making their own biography a success. Therefore you could call this generation, as *Oevermann* did, "biography entrepreneurs". It seriously and pragmatically endeavours to cope with self responsibility and with the challenging problems of the autonomous life conduct. Correspondingly it tries with modesty to take responsibility in the family, in society and in politics. This shows up, for example, in the fact that the boy or girl friend is usually regarded as a candidate for marriage right from the start, even if a marriage seems to lie far away due to the biographical phase and circumstances. The predecessor generation dallied with pure fun relationships, "one night stands" and with singleness as a virtue. In general the youngest adult generation presents itself as interested in politics but without claiming to see through politics, as was typically the case in the predecessor generation. It endeavours to prepare solidly for taking over responsibility in a job, whereas the predecessor generation was partly successful with marketing bluffs instead of solid achievements. (This played a role in the boom in information technologies during the 1990s.)

6. Conclusions. The succession of generations as a process of secularisation

I have tried to demonstrate that the process of secularisation in the succession of generations in *Germany* not only becomes apparent in the steady quantitative regression of "religiosity", but can also be traced materially in the transformation of the very form of each generation. The consciousness of autonomy (autonomy in the sense of a structure potential of human life), the understanding of the difficulties and problems of the autonomous life conduct and the sovereignty in coping with them seem to grow from generation to generation. The autonomy-oriented and in this respect very pretentious, ideological and illusory program of general emancipation and de-traditionalisation embraced by the *generation of '68* was gradually replaced by realism and modesty. This succession of generations appears as the piecemeal *realisation* of the constitutive features of an autonomous life conduct, which initially was more an abstract program than a concrete reality. Some members of older generations followed the line of transformation some steps and revised their original concepts of life. There are some indications of certain parallels between the generational change of the different modern industrial nations, although the formation of a generation is bound to a particular political community. But a detailed knowledge of this phenomenon would be a task for future research. In the youngest adult generation the transformation process seems to reach the point where the autonomous life conduct becomes more or less quotidian.[17]

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[1] This article is based on a paper which was presented at the Turin Conference 2003 of the *International Society for the Sociology of Religion (SISR/ISSR)* "Religion and Generations", July 21-25, in the thematic session "Religion, Youth and Young Adults" that was organized by *Yves Lambert* and *John Fulton*.

[2] See Bréchon, P. (2004), Deutsche Shell (2000) 157-180, Dogan, M. (2002), Henkel, R. (2001), Jagodzinski, W. (1995) 270f., Meulemann, H. (2003).

[3] To this group also belongs *Ulrich Oevermann* and colleagues at the *University of Frankfurt am Main* as well as colleagues in the former sociological research project „Entsolidarisierung" (dir: *Hartmut Neuendorff*) at the University of Dortmund (2000-2003). Bibliographies of *Objective Hermeneutics* can be found via internet: www.objektivehermeneutik.de

[4] Oevermann, U. (2001a, 2001c).

[5] Oevermann, U. (2001b) 78-128.

[6] Mannheim, K. (1976).

[7] Oevermann, U. (2001b).

[8] Oevermann, U. (1995, 2001a).

[9] I refer to a pragmatic-structuralist notion of autonomy in the sense of an objective structure potential of human life praxis which shows in the fact that as a human being you can't avoid making decisions: Every omission of a decision ultimately is itself a decision. Compare Oevermann, U. (1995, 2001a). And naturally it makes a great difference if someone perceives this objectively existing responsibility for decisions or not.

[10] At this point a possible objection could refer to the case of *George W. Bush's* emphatic rhetoric of "freedom" and his interpretation of history as a kind of salvific history which aims at the realisation of autonomy, because they are obviously *religious* in character (as well as national) and therefore could be cited against the assumption that it is *secularsation* which consists in the ever more elaborate articulation of the human autonomy potential. But a closer look at this rhetoric and interpretation of history rather confirms this assumption, because it seems to be exactly the lack of soberness, realism and down-to-earth orientation (that is a natural consequence of the disenchantment and realisation of the human autonomy potential and of the largeness of the challenge an autonomous life conduct poses) in his religiously detached worldview that has enabled a foreign policy that has in fact repeatedly disregarded autonomy, e.g. the autonomy of peoples that had not decided to overturn their oppressors. In such cases a consistently autonomy-oriented foreign policy would have to accept and respect such a in a sense autonomous decision of peoples. It would also have to be restricted to nurturing the *insight* of these peoples that this is, even though perhaps without consciousness, an autonomous decision and that, at least with the support of the international community, other options would be available. In his famous "dialectics of mastery and servitude" in his "Phenomenology of the Spirit" *Hegel* has already pointed to the fact that the *awareness* of the existing autonomy potential originally is absent.

[11] In a sense I regard this article as continuation of *David Riesman's* analysis beyond the point of the transformation process where *Riesman's* analysis ended.

[12] Later as established adults many replaced ideological *Marxism* with an ideological *"Neo-Liberalism"* or to put it in a formula: They replaced one *ML* with another *ML*: *Marxism-Leninism* with *Market-Liberalism*. This old-fashioned, ideological *Market-Liberalism* today has become one of the major obstacles for the resolution of the persistent crisis of the "working society", because it comprises traditional work ethics.

[13] Contemporary *US-American* critics of the secularisation thesis notoriously equate *secularisation* and *secularism/atheism*, what is a fundamental category mistake. And they then assert that secularisation theory is essentially an ideology or political doctrine and not a scientific theory. See e.g. Hadden, J. K. (1987) 588, Stark, R., & Finke, R. (2000) 62, 78f. But whereas secularisation theories of the 1960s and 1970s really often had a secularist character, the statement seems downright ridiculous in regard to the classical approaches of *Weber* and *Durkheim*.

[14] See Coupland, D. (1991), Rosen, B. C. (2001).

[15] This generation is the first generation whose members experienced their adolescence and developed their concepts of life in a unified *Germany* – that is, in a normal sovereign nation state. The *German* nation state therefore is a normality for them. It can serve them as model of the autonomous life conduct.

[16] Against this background it is perhaps interesting for the reader to know that in January 2005 *Oevermann* started a research project at the *University of Frankfurt/M.* which primarily focuses on the emerging life concepts of contemporary adolescents in *Germany* with the case reconstructionist methodology of *Objective Hermeneutics*. I belong to this project and will participate in this research process.

[17] This motivates the speculation that it will be this generation that will accomplish the introduction of an unconditional basic income when it dominates the political scene.