

ARE GEOGRAPHERS RELIGIOUSLY UNMUSICAL? POSITIONALITIES IN GEOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH ON RELIGION

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Summary: Although there are indications that more geographers are taking up religion as an area of interest, geography of religion still is a subfield that is not very well developed. In particular, many new cultural geographers seem to shy away from including religion into their research as markers of identity alongside race, class and gender. The article investigates the reasons for this attitude, which has a long history and is connected with the (perceived) contrast between science and religion and the secularization thesis. For a long time, this was the generally accepted explanation for the decline of the significance of religion in Western societies, but recently this has been seriously questioned in its validity. In addition, the paper handles the question as to whether methodological agnosticism is the (only) adequate approach in doing research on religion from a social or cultural science view. If research is taken seriously, all researchers are inevitably confronted with their own biographies; with contingencies of cultural imprints and with influences of certain (a)religious milieux. So it is essential that they are aware of this and do not ignore it when researching. Being a believer certainly is not a disadvantage in doing research on religion but can be an advantage, just as it is an advantage or even a necessity for a musicologist to be able to read and practise music.

Zusammenfassung: Obwohl in den letzten Jahren mehr Geographen als früher religiöse Phänomene in ihrer Forschung berücksichtigen, ist die Religionsgeographie nach wie vor ein unterentwickeltes Teilgebiet des Gesamtfachs. Insbesondere scheuen sich viele Vertreter der Neuen Kulturgeographie, das Thema Religion in ihre Forschungen einzubeziehen und sie als ein Identitätsmerkmal zu betrachten, das für viele Menschen so wichtig ist wie Rasse/Ethnizität, Klasse und Geschlecht. Der vorliegende Artikel fragt nach den Gründen für diese Haltung. Sie hat in der wissenschaftlichen Welt eine lange Geschichte und hängt mit dem (empfundener) Gegensatz zwischen Religion und Wissenschaft sowie mit der Säkularisierungsthese zusammen. Diese stellte lange Zeit die bevorzugte und allgemein anerkannte Erklärung für den Bedeutungsrückgang von Religion in westlichen Gesellschaften dar, wird aber zunehmend in ihrer Gültigkeit in Zweifel gezogen. Weiter wird gefragt, ob der methodologische Agnostizismus die (einzig) angemessene Haltung eines Sozial- oder Kulturwissenschaftlers sei, der sich mit dem Phänomen Religion beschäftigt. Lässt er sich ernsthaft auf dieses Thema ein, so wird er bald mit der eigenen Biographie, der Kontingenz seiner kulturellen Prägungen und den Einflüssen bestimmter (a)religiöser Milieus konfrontiert. Dabei ist es wichtig, sich als Forscher dessen bewusst zu sein und es nicht zu ignorieren. Für einen Wissenschaftler muss es keinen Nachteil bedeuten, selbst Gläubiger zu sein; im Gegenteil, es kann ein Vorteil sein, so wie es für einen Musikwissenschaftler von Vorteil oder sogar notwendig ist, Noten lesen und selbst Musik machen zu können.

Keywords: Religion, geography, positionality, secularization thesis, methodology

1 Introduction

In early December 2009, a call for papers was put on the Critical Geography Forum (<https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=crit-geog-forum>) announcing a conference on the geographies of religion in Newcastle/UK in March 2010. There was an unexpectedly large number of reactions to the conference theme within a few days. One of the very early ones read:

“It’s a sad day indeed when critical and radical geographers begin to run conferences on ‘religion, faith and spirituality’. I recognize that there are very legitimate

questions that social scientists must deal with regarding the role of religion and other superstitions in the mystification of social life... My sense is that (the conference) is ... to serve covertly as a vehicle for some sort of positive affirmation of the intrinsic value of religion etc., as such. To the degree that this may be so, I wish to register my opposition”.

Although the bulk of the responses to this reaction were in the negative and the conference itself was very successful, the reaction still seems to me to be not uncommon of the attitude of many geographers (and other academics) towards religion.

2 Two German geographers between science and religion

ROBERT GRADMANN (1865–1950) never published anything close to the geography of religion. His main works were on vegetation geography and on the regional geography of Southern Germany, and his (meanwhile disproved) “Steppenheidetheorie” was intensively discussed in geographical journals (SCHRÖDER 1982; SCHENK 2002). A professor at Tübingen and Erlangen, he was the supervisor of Walter Christaller’s famous dissertation on the central place theory. However, in his “first life”, he had studied theology and was, until the age of 35, a Lutheran minister in Württemberg. When, in 1900, GRADMANN left his ministry in order to work at the university, he felt “... an exhilarating feeling of freedom ... Every honest clergyman will encounter the antagonism between faith and knowledge, and I doubly, because my personal aptitude definitely tends more towards science ... Doubt necessarily belongs to the nature of a scientist ... In my opinion, religiosity to a high degree is a matter of innate talent, but also of religious education. Only he who has both will become a good minister”¹⁾ (GRADMANN 1965, 94). One can only guess that it was mainly internal conflicts over the truth of evolution theory and Darwinism on the one and the biblical accounts of the creation of the world on the other hand that caused these conflicts. That GRADMANN never became an atheist, however, is shown by the fact that he ended his autobiography with the sentence “Soli deo Gloria”. For the second half of the 19th century, LIVINGSTONE (2008, 197) has observed that in Britain “the majority (of religious thinkers) found ways of accommodating their theology to more or less revised versions of evolutionary theory”. Although the cultural, religious and intellectual climate at the end of the 19th century was dif-

¹⁾ “...ein beglückendes Freiheitsgefühl... Der Widerstreit zwischen Glauben und Wissen bekommt jeder ehrliche Pfarrer zu spüren, ich doppelt, weil meine persönliche Begabung entschieden mehr zur Wissenschaft neigt... Der Zweifel gehört zum Wesen des Forschers... Auch die Religiosität ist nach meiner Überzeugung in hohem Grade Sache der angeborenen Begabung, allerdings auch der religiösen Erziehung. Nur wer über beides verfügt, kann ein wirklich guter Pfarrer werden“ (Translation R. H.). The *Lebenserinnerungen* were written by GRADMANN in 1944/45 for his family and posthumously published in an abridged form only. GRADMANN did not write at length on his thoughts and feelings concerning his career change. However, there are a few further remarks on his views on science and religion elsewhere (e.g., pp. 49 and 60f.), which show that he always had had ambivalent feelings about religion and science.

ferent in Germany, the same seems to have been the case at least for German Protestantism (SCHRÖDER 2008). Hence, GRADMANN’s decision to leave the ministry was not inevitable and probably due to his personal non-theological ambitions, which had even been there before he studied theology.

When the new German geographical journal ERDKUNDE was launched in 1947, its founding editor CARL TROLL (1899–1975) saw to it that two articles on the geography of religions appeared in its first volume. The first one, placed immediately after TROLL’s own lead paper on “Geographic Science in Germany during the Period 1933–1945: A Critique and Justification” (English translation in *Ann. Assoc. Amer. Geogr.*, 39, 1949, 99–137) was on religious buildings in Indochina (CREDNER 1947), the second, written by TROLL’s student PAUL FICKELER, was on basic questions in the geography of religions (FICKELER 1947²⁾). TROLL, one of the most influential post-war German geographers (TILLEY 1984), was a staunch Catholic (LAUER 1976, 6). His research interests were more on the physical side of geography, and he never actively worked in the field of the geography of religions. Yet he regarded religion an important part of human geography, as he expressed in his opening speech to the conference of the German Association for the Study of Religions, which he gave as the Rector of Bonn University in 1961 (TROLL 1975). Moreover, he encouraged a number of studies on the field. While FICKELER could not carry out his ambitious plans to present a comprehensive geography of religion of Asia (BÜTTNER 1985, 71), some of TROLL’s other students produced a number of studies on the geography of religion as doctoral theses and/or as articles in ERDKUNDE and in other journals, the most notable being HELMUT HAHN and ANNELIESE SIEVERS.

After the Nazi catastrophe, the general mood in Germany was to a certain extent toward a return to religion and faith. However, this interest in religion lasted for a limited time only. In the sixties, many people in West Germany, as in other West European countries, started to turn away from the churches, and the influence of religious institutions on society in general became weaker (HENKEL and KNIPPENBERG 2005). This secularization process also influenced the questions on which research was done and articles were published: As an example,

²⁾ An English translation of this article was included in a reader compiled by Mikesell and Wagner, which is considered a basic writing of the Berkeley School of (“old”) cultural geography (FICKELER 1962).

ERDKUNDE, the German geographical journal with by far the most articles on the geography of religion³⁾ after 1945, published very little on this topic in the 1960s and 1970s. It was during these decades, parallel to the declining relevance of religion and religious institutions in society, that the secularization thesis began to be the most widely accepted explanation for these developments.

The examples of these two geographers show that there has been tension between religion and science for a long time, but also that there are different answers of academics to the question whether to dismiss religion altogether and “substitute” it with science, to strictly separate the two spheres of life or to try to accommodate them with each other. These answers are not independent of the private and personal attitudes towards religion that a person has, as the examples also show. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, indications for rapid secularization were so strong that the validity of the secularization thesis was almost undisputed for a long time. We will therefore turn to this thesis in more detail in the following section and discuss it and other theoretical approaches to religion in general. Then we shall have a closer look at geography as one academic field and its relation to religion.

3 The secularization thesis challenged

The secularization thesis can be traced back to Max Weber who is generally regarded as one of the founders of sociology and sociology of religion. He saw the development of the modern Western European society as an irreversible process of secularization. The predominance of a purpose-driven decision-making, the “occidental rationalism”, would eventually lead to an “Entzauberung” (disenchantment) of the world and finally to a complete disappearance of religion. In his influential book “The Sacred Canopy” (1967), the Austro-American sociologist of religion PETER BERGER tried to give theoretical explanations for the secularization proc-

ess. BERGER considered it to be a process by which parts of society and sections of culture are released from the domination of religious institutions and symbols. Historically, this process can primarily be observed in the industrialized Western societies and most clearly in Protestantism. The roots of the secularization process lie in Judaism, where in ancient times, according to BERGER, God was radically transcended and where ethics were rationalized. This idea also gained momentum during the Enlightenment in Europe. Most of the ensuing empirical studies agreed on the decreasing significance of religion. For Germany, e.g., it was observed that the ties of people to the two established churches, the Protestant and the Roman Catholic Church have weakened significantly after the Second World War (HENKEL 2004). Corresponding data for other European countries have been collected and interpreted, among others, by MARTIN (1978).

During the last decades, new doubts about the secularization thesis have been loudly voiced (STARK 2000). In European sociology of religion, the individualization thesis has (partly) replaced the secularization thesis. THOMAS LUCKMANN only applies the term secularization to society as a whole and strongly denies its validity for the individual. In his book “The Invisible Religion” (1967), he points out that religion does not just disappear but it changes its form of expression. Churches and other religious organizations lose ground whenever a transformation of the predominant appearance of religion in society can be observed. Religion becomes more private. Dogmatic systems following church guidelines become increasingly less accepted and are being replaced by “patchwork religions”, often syncretistic and individually made up. Like other organizations in society (e.g., political parties and trade unions), the churches experience how people lose confidence in them without abandoning their religious beliefs. These new developments made DAVIE (1994) coin the catch phrase “believing without belonging” with regard to Great Britain. The individualization thesis often implies that the process of modernization leads to a withdrawal of religion from public life into a private niche. It has been convincingly shown by CASANOVA (1994), however, that the opposite is happening in countries like Spain, Poland, Brazil and the USA. Here a process is taking place which can be called deprivatisation of religion. Thus as a “public matter”, religion has not reached the end of the road, although it is finding a new role.

Undoubtedly, plurality in religion is constantly increasing worldwide. The impact of globalization

³⁾ A preliminary count for the time from 1945 to 2010 resulted in the following figures: Die ERDE 7 articles, Geographische Zeitschrift 8 articles, ERDKUNDE 20 articles. Apart from CREDNER’s and FICKELER’s articles, the latter were published in 1949 (TUCKERMANN), 1951 (HAHN), 1958 (HAHN, SIEVERS), 1965 (HARD, WIRTH), 1972 (KING), 1974 (TICHY), 1984 (SCHÖLLER), 1987 (BONINE), 1989 (EHLERS/MOMENI), 1994 (TYRAKOWSKI, SINGH, GRÖTZBACH, GUTSCHOW), 1995 (KREUTZMANN), 2002 (EHLERS/MOMENI) and 2007 (GOEKE).

with its new means of communication and its migration streams is introducing religious movements, which in the past had been confined to certain parts of the world, into other regions as well. Partly due to this development, explanatory models that are influenced by an economic thinking, which pays more attention to the increasing plurality in religion(s), are gaining ground over the secularization thesis. These approaches imply that religion is controlled by similar mechanisms as the economy: Religious needs create a demand that asks for adequate supply. A market of religions emerges that is ruled by the laws of competition. Religious supplies are able to focus on the needs of certain target groups or “market segments”. Applying an economic approach to religion was first developed in the USA. Due to the historic church-state separation in the USA, no “religious monopolies” could develop as they did in most European countries (or, like in Germany, “dupolies”) with hardly any room for competition left. For advocates of the economic approach (e.g., STARK and FINKE 2000), the explanation of the fact that in the USA individual as well as social religious life is much stronger than in most European countries is to be found in the economic view of the growth of religion.

Both “rival” theories to the secularization approach, the individualization and the religious market theories, have weakened the idea of a global applicability of the secularization thesis. Nevertheless, WILFORD (2010), in an otherwise impressive and detailed overview of the different aspects and versions of the thesis and its critics, complains that it has been marginalized by human geographers and tries to salvage it for geographical research. In my view, by and large, when dealing with religious phenomena geographers have avoided using theories developed in sociology altogether (HENKEL 2006). At least very few, if any, have made use of the other two theoretical approaches.

4 Geography, geographers and religion

The geography of religion has recently been described as a “burgeoning subfield” (WILFORD 2010, 328). It seems that there is a growing awareness of some geographers of the increasing significance of religion, as shown in the long list of English language literature on the subfield published during the last decade which was compiled and commented on by KONG (2010). Nearly a decade ago, in her literature review, she still had to remind colleagues that

“...religion deserves to be acknowledged fully and in like manner alongside race, class and gender in geographical analysis” (KONG 2001, 212).

In the meantime, geographers have tackled questions by bringing in religion as a relevant factor: Among others, questions of international migration including those of the identity of immigrant groups (HENKEL 2002; SCHMITT 2003; SCHOPPENGERD 2008), questions of war and peace and of the politics/religion connection (KNIPPENBERG 2006; HENKEL and ŠAKAJA 2009; MEGORAN 2010; HENKEL 2011), questions of poverty and social action (BEAUMONT 2008; CLOKE 2011), and questions of the religion/development connection (HENKEL 1986; HENKEL 1989; LUNN 2009). In addition, questions of the position of a geography of religion from a philosophy and history of science point of view have been raised and answered, e.g., by WUNDER (2005).

However, the community of geographers working in and on the subfield of geography of religion is still small. Within “new” cultural geography, the main English textbooks of the last decades virtually do not mention religion (STUMP 2008, 370), nor do readers like the two-volume one by THRIFT and WHATMORE (2004). There is scant mention of religion, e.g., in the journal “Cultural Geographies”, which can be regarded as a flagship of new cultural geography. In German academic geography, the situation is similar: The books on the subject (e.g., GEBHARDT et al. 2003; BERNDT and PÜTZ 2007) leave out the topic altogether, and at the annual meetings (since 2004) of German new cultural geographers, aspects of religion have been discussed only marginally. Judged on the basis of self-descriptions of German academic geographers by geographical subfields, the geography of religion holds a peripheral position in the knowledge network of the subject (GLÜCKLER and GOEKE 2009). At the institutional level, working groups on the field have existed in the United States (Specialty Group “Geography of Religions and Belief Systems” within the Association of American Geographers, www.gorabs.org) and in Germany (“Arbeitskreis Religionsgeographie” within the German Geographical Society, www.religionsgeographie.de) for several decades, but have remained small. A new Research Group on “Geographies of Religion, Spirituality and Faith” has been founded recently within the (British) Royal Geographical Society. But they can still be regarded as only marginal within the larger area of human geography. Why is this so?

It seems to me that there are basically three possible reasons which are interrelated. The first reason

for many human geographers (and other social and cultural scientists) to ignore the religious factor in their research is that they regard it as irrelevant to their research questions or that they are of the opinion that in order to understand or explain social and spatial phenomena, religion is not as relevant as other markers of identity like gender, class and ethnicity. In doing so, they explicitly or implicitly refer to the secularization thesis, which, as I have argued, is no longer the universally accepted scientific concept of understanding the developments in the realm of (society and) religion. I have asked whether this attitude is still a reflex on the presumption that enlightenment, modernism, secularization and scientific thinking are incompatible with religion (HENKEL 2004). Sometimes there are also more aggressive attitudes like the one quoted at the beginning of this article which might be influenced by the Marxian criticism of religion as the “opium of the people”. In an article on the insider/outsider problem in research on religion, MIKE FERBER (2006, 177) even observes an “academic theophobia, of which geographers of religion are quite familiar”. For those geographers who regard religion as irrelevant, it may be useful to note that PETER BERGER (1999) who, as shown above, was one of the first people to put forward what one could call a systematic secularization theory, has “revoked” his earlier works in the meanwhile and now speaks of a process of desecularization. It is important to note that this change in view was not caused by the 9/11 events after which so many books and articles were written which postulated a “return of the gods”, “resurgence of religion” or the like. For BERGER, “the old secularization theory ... seemed less and less capable of making sense of the empirical evidence from different parts of the world” (BERGER 2001, 445). The persistence of religion and/or religious revivals in Africa, Latin America, parts of Asia and Eastern Europe, but also in the U.S. made him change his views. According to him, there are only two secularized sections left in the world. One is “people with Western-style higher education, especially in the humanities and social sciences ... (who when) they travel to, say, Istanbul, Jerusalem or New Delhi, ... almost exclusively meet with other intellectuals – that is, people much like themselves – and they can then jump to the conclusion that this or that faculty club faithfully reflects the cultural situation outside – a fatal mistake indeed!” (ibid., 445–446). A similar observation was made by ROGER STUMP (2008, 369) in his recent textbook on the geography of religion: “... to the extent that academics have believed that religion has little bearings

on their own lives, they may also have become less likely to study it”. The other secularized section, according to BERGER, this time geographically defined, is Western Europe. This latter observation has made BERGER and others like DAVIE (2002) look for an explanation for this “European exceptionalism”. This is in contrast to the formerly proclaimed “American exceptionalism”, i.e., the surprisingly high religiosity in the USA which was (and often still is) difficult for Europeans to understand considering the fact that the USA is one of the most modernized countries in the world – and that according to many Europeans secularization goes along with modernization. Interestingly, BERGER’s change in his own views has led the most vocal British advocate of secularization theory, STEVE BRUCE (2002), to try to convince him that his recantation was unnecessary (BRUCE 2001).

A second reason for human geographers to ignore the religious factor in their research may be an attitude that results from a certain general shyness or a reluctance towards religion. This eschewing of religion may be connected to a feeling among geographers that they do not have the competence to bring in this aspect into their geographical thinking. ALFRED HETTNER, arguably the most influential German geographer in the first half of the 20th century, once wrote that “the geography of religions is the most difficult and most delicate of geographical thought”⁴⁾ (1931, 411) – and then basically ignored it in his writing. More recently, EDGAR WUNDER (2005, 235–240), warns geographers to avoid what he calls “theologysation” of their research. Referring to YI-FU TUAN, MANFRED BÜTTNER, CHRIS PARK and others, he is of the opinion that geography should keep its distance from theology and seems to imply that methodological agnosticism is the (only) appropriate and possible approach. Obviously, however, his conclusion is not to ignore religion in his human geographical thinking. Just on the contrary, because he is convinced that religion plays an important role in most societies and, probably more importantly, in most peoples’ lives, he puts forward one of the most substantial theoretical studies of the geography of religion and makes a strong point that the religious factor is crucial in understanding today’s human geography. In this, he agrees with STUMP who is convinced that “... religion plays a crucial role in the cultural life of different groups and places, and more specifically that it is integrated in complex ways into the beliefs, actions, and experiences of believers and

⁴⁾ „... der schwerste und heikelste Teil geographischer Betrachtung“ (translation R. H.)

that its effects cannot be reduced merely to secondary manifestations of more basic socioeconomic and political trends". STUMP goes on to argue: "... despite the predictions of secularization theory, the salience of religion in the geographical study of culture and society has not declined in contemporary settings. On the contrary, religion remains a key factor in a great variety of cultural and social phenomena relevant to the concerns of human geography" (STUMP 2008, 370–372). Arguing in a similar manner, HOLLOWAY and VALINS (2002, 6) note that "religious and spiritual matters form an important context through which the majority of the world's population live their lives, forge a sense (indeed an ethics) of self, and make and perform their different geographies." I do not share WUNDER's fears about the dangers of coming too close to theology when incorporating religion in the geographical analysis of human groups and societies. This is because I am of the opinion that every person, i.e., including academics, is influenced by religious/theological or areligious thoughts and feelings. And this is connected with the third reason why human geographers shy away from dealing with religion.

5 Is "methodological agnosticism" the only appropriate approach for a human geographer when dealing with religion?

I have been researching geography of religion for about 25 years now, and I remember conversations with colleagues about the geography of religion years ago who indicated to me that they are not religious. Likewise, STUMP (2008, 370) observes that "... during much of the last third of the twentieth century, the study of religion in most of the social sciences increasingly (and often mistakenly) came to be perceived by those working outside the area as the domain of individuals having a strong commitment to religion in their personal lives". Does one need to be religious to do research on religion – or should one, in order to be "neutral", not be religious at all? This question could also be put in a different way: Is it an advantage or a disadvantage for a researcher to be a believer when studying religion? In answering this question, one could put forward a counter-question: Is it an advantage or a disadvantage for a researcher to be a German when studying German language, history or geography?

As a researcher, can I be "neutral" or "objective" at all? I think it is not possible, especially in research on religion(s). I would fool myself if I assumed I could do research objectively. To begin with, the choice of

my research topics very often has been born out of my own biography – usually it is topics which I think are relevant. Sometimes topics are chosen which may be thought to enhance one's career prospects, but more often their choice is the result of personal concern. Referring to Max Weber's postulate to avoid value judgments in social research, the church historian GRAF says "There is no neutral observer where religion is concerned"⁵⁾ (GRAF 2004, 69). Of late, geographers, especially from feminist viewpoints, have called for more emotional geographies (DAVIDSON et al. 2005; HOPKINS 2009). The article by T. SLATER (2004) is a good example of a "geographer as pilgrim" who tells his very personal and autobiographical story of an encounter with God. In 1997, he visited a conference of historical geographers in Bologna/Italy. He described this visit as a pilgrimage, but not to a sacred place in an organized religious sense where some miracle happened in the past, but to a railway station. Here, two of his students were killed in a fascist bomb attack together with 80 other persons 17 years before. When he read the names of the killed on the slab at the station, he had an encounter with God which deeply affected him and moved him to tears. Subsequently, he put this experience on paper and presented it at various occasions. He then reflected on the female side of God (it was Mother's Day in Italy on that day), on pilgrimage and on memorials. SLATER's article is, as he says, an attempt to bring together two of his identities – geographer and believer. His conclusion is: "... human geographers should surely no longer ignore the individual religious dimensions in time and space that give meaning to the lives of such a large proportion of the world's population..." (SLATER 2004, 251). Similarly, MEGORAN's (2010) account of the radical change of geopolitical views of American and British evangelical leaders towards Muslims, Jews and the Near East conflict is full of emotions. It tells the story of the Reconciliation Walk, a grassroots evangelical Christian project that retraced the route of the First Crusade 900 years after in apology for it. It is a story of "the transformative potential of personal encounters in place" (ibid., 383) with Muslim political leaders and ordinary people along the way of the Crusades.

Obviously, SLATER's and MEGORAN's approaches cannot be termed methodological agnosticism, and therefore they are approaches that are just the opposite of WUNDER's warning about getting too much theology into geographical research on religion. Yet, if one identifies oneself too much with a certain re-

⁵⁾ „In Sachen Religion gibt es keinen neutralen Beobachter“ (transl. R. H.).

ligion or religious group, isn't there the danger to be or become biased? Of course, as an academic studying religious phenomena, I should try, as much as possible, to avoid using creeds, beliefs and value judgments as starting points for my research. But in order to understand believers' motifs for convictions and resulting behaviour and actions, it might prove useful or even necessary to deal with these as well. The situation can become especially challenging when doing research on a religious group to which the researcher (actively) belongs himself⁶. On one hand he needs to be aware of his positionality and always critically observe himself during the research process. On the other, he cannot avoid being religious and/or part of that religious community, in the same or a similar way in which a German researcher cannot avoid being German when doing research on his own country. He needs to be aware, as far as possible, of his being religious (or German), and take it into account in his conclusions. SACK (1997, 6) even goes as far as arguing that "the arrogance of reason in modernity stems from the belief that the partial offers little or nothing of value – that we could eventually be virtually impartial and still human. This is wrong. We will always be partially situated and in the world". There are certain advantages for a researcher in being German when doing research on Germany, the most obvious one being his ability to speak and understand the German language well. The same applies to a believer: In their religious texts as well as in their conversations, members of religious groups often use certain language and terminology that can sometimes be difficult for outsiders to understand. Another advantage of the researcher being a believer is that he often has access to people and sources more easily, because members will trust him more than an outsider (MEGORAN 2004, 45). LAURIE (2010, 167) stresses that researchers of faith "have to be firm in (their) faith or at least not too wobbly or too protective about what (they) think is important about it". She demands that "a safe space has to be created for people of faith to speak, be heard and to do research" and hopes "that this is possible in many settings" but is not too sure "if it yet exists very widely in academic geography" (ibid.).

In his discussion of the question of objectivity in research on religion and religious group, FERBER (2006) emphasizes the principle of reflexivity as a requirement for a researcher who wants to avoid "a god-trick" objectivity, i.e., an attitude that perceives

the researcher to be far above and remote of the researched, observing them with an infinitely wide perspective. Following on this, he refers to the work of PORPORA who says that it is necessary to drop the pretence of a "rigid separation between observer and observed" and to "overcome the sociological neglect of theology – not as object of study but as co-contributor of insight" (PORPORA 2001, 7). As for sociology, the same could be said for geography. Besides, in each and every research on social issues, we have to be aware of what ANTHONY GIDDENS (1984, 284–374) calls the double hermeneutic: Researchers try to understand, explain and "make sense" of phenomena which are already constituted as meaningful by the researched.

By this argument I do not intend to say at all that only those geographers who practice and/or believe in religion are able to do social and cultural geographical research on religion. This is clearly shown by a joint research project on nineteenth-century Methodism in Cornwall (UK), which was carried out by three geographers of different positionalities as far as religion is concerned (BAILEY et al. 2009). David labels himself "atheist", Adrian "a person of (Christian) faith", and Catherine "indifferent". Their reflections on their study subject and process are very worthwhile to take note of indeed. Although obviously their "... personal predilections and beliefs did not map neatly onto each other" (260), they agree, "how important it is for geographers to maintain a reflexive approach to their historically grounded identities" (255), that "(i)t is clear to us that faith makes a difference to the theoretical and interpretative strategies adopted in research" (257), and "that the construction of geographical knowledge is always rooted in subjective, historical and contingent praxis" (266). As a conclusion from the research process, Catherine states "... that I, as a researcher, also have to exercise a form of faith: that people believe that scripture is the word of god ... However, I remain the skeptic who feels as if it is faith that my scholarly training won't let me believe in" (265).

PETER BERGER, in his earlier writings, and others have argued that the most appropriate position to do (sociological) research on religion is that of "methodological atheism" while others thought a "methodological agnosticism" was the most adequate one. These approaches say that it is necessary to "bracket" aside the question whether religious statements, convictions and beliefs of certain individuals or groups on which research is done are true or not. HAMILTON (2001, 7) argues that doing research on the basis of methodological agnosticism unnecessarily constrains

⁶ I am using the masculine pronouns here as representing both genders.

the researcher because it “rules out the possibility of taking any proposition which is seen to derive from religious sources seriously”. Therefore it can be an advantage to be a believer when doing research on religion. Concerning those who regard themselves as “religiously unmusical” (see below) but still want, for whatever reason, to study religion, I agree with YORGASON and DELLA DORA: “Geographers need to allow religion to speak back” (2009, 629). Believers, atheists and agnostics, all need to be aware of their own biography, with contingencies of cultural imprints and with the influences of the religious or areligious milieux within which they grew up.

6 Religious unmusicality and vicarious religion

MAX WEBER called himself “religiously unmusical”⁷⁾ – and still regarded religion very crucial in his studies⁸⁾. The same can be said of Emile Durkheim, the other important figure in early sociology (KNOBLAUCH 1999, 58). More recently, JÜRGEN HABERMAS, one of the most influential social theorists of the last decades, who also “discovered” religion to be relevant about 10 years ago and since then speaks of the postsecular society, also speaks of this “religious unmusicality” (HABERMAS 2001, 30). One of these occasions was at his debate on reason and religion with Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI (HABERMAS 2006, 50; cf. KORF 2006). Although he does not directly apply this dictum to himself, it is clear from the context that he regards himself as

⁷⁾ „Ich bin zwar religiös absolut ‚unmusikalisch‘ und habe weder Bedürfnis noch Fähigkeit, irgendwelche seelischen ‚Bauwerke‘ religiösen Charakters in mir zu errichten – das geht einfach nicht resp. ich lehne es ab. Aber ich bin, nach genauer Selbstprüfung, weder antireligiös noch irreligiös. Ich empfinde mich auch in dieser Hinsicht als einen Krüppel, als einen verstümmelten Menschen, dessen inneres Schicksal es ist, sich dies ehrlich eingestehen zu müssen...“ (“It is true that I am religiously completely ‘unmusical’, and I neither have the desire nor the ability to erect in me any psychic ‘edifices’ of a religious character – it is just impossible, and I dislike it. But a thorough self-examination has told me that I am neither antireligious nor irreligious. In this respect, I feel to be a cripple, a mutilated person whose inner fate it is to have to honestly admit this to himself ...”); Letter to Ferdinand Tönnies, 19 February 1909, MAX WEBER Gesamtausgabe II/6. pp. 63–66, quoted after JOACHIM VAHLAND 2001: Max Webers entzauberte Welt. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, p. 48; Translation R. H.)

⁸⁾ On MAX WEBER as a “Christian sociologist”, see SWATOS and KIVISTO 1991.

belonging to this category of people (HARRINGTON 2007).

What is meant by this phrase “religiously unmusical”? Clearly, WEBER does not mean irreligious or even atheist or antireligious. However, it probably means that he considers religion (like music) to be something very important, even necessary, but is unable to practise it – maybe with a little regret (KAESLER 2009). It seems that he considers religion or sensitivity to it to be a talent that one has or does not have. If we take a closer look at this parallel between religion and music, and if we take into account that in our deliberations here we are considering the academic study of these, it is obvious that in our context we are talking here not of religion as such nor of music as such but of religious science and its scientific counterpart musicology, the science of music. For a musicologist it is certainly useful to be musical himself. He does not need to be a brilliant or famous musician, but it certainly helps to be able to read music (a necessary ability for a musicologist), to sing, or to play an instrument and to have a feeling for the beauty of music (harmony, rhythm, melody). On the other hand, as there are no people who are completely unmusical, there are also none who are completely religiously unmusical. There might be something like a “genetic inclination” towards music and religion in certain people, but certainly education and the musical/religious environment a person grows up in has a strong influence on whether a person becomes a musical/religious person. As a Christian believer, I am convinced that there is something like a religious desire in all human beings because God has created man as a partner (Genesis 1, 26: “in his image” can be interpreted as “a counterpart”). Above all, people choose for themselves whether music and religion are going to be important parts of their lives.

WEBER’S and HABERMAS’ attitude reminds me of an observation made, mainly relevant to Europe, by the sociologist GRACE DAVIE. She describes a widespread “notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing” and calls it “vicarious religion” (DAVIE 2007, 22). Although this observation applies to (European) societies at large and not in the first place to social scientists trying to understand what is going on in society and especially with respect to religion, it seems to me that it is also applicable to the latter – not least because, after all, they are also members of their societies.

7 Conclusion

Like other social scientists studying religion, human geographers who try to bring a religious factor into their research are confronted with the question whether they can do this regardless of their personal position in respect to religion, i.e., whether they are themselves believers, agnostics, atheists or “religiously unmusical”. I have argued here that since the researcher is also a “private person”, he can and should not ignore his personal religious or areligious preferences but remain aware of them. A high level of reflexivity during the whole course of research is required. The believer, if he researches communities of his own faith, needs to distance himself to a certain extent but has the advantage that he may have better access to the group, their language and their thinking. Many researchers who, like MAX WEBER and JÜRGEN HABERMAS, do not regard themselves religious have nevertheless come to the conclusion that it is important to look at this aspect of life. With secularization theory losing ground as the dominating approach toward religious developments worldwide, geographers many of whom so far have regarded religion as irrelevant for their research may reconsider their position. If they do, it is suggested that they do not do it from a “god-trick” perspective but that they develop an attitude in their research that allows religion to “speak back”.

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