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Religio-spiritual strategies of self-help and empowerment in everyday life

Selected cases of spirituality in Germany

Introduction

The discussion of 'post-secularity' is in the first place an academic one, concerning a paradigm shift away from the widely accepted assumption that 'secularisation' is still a central feature of contemporary times. Since 9/11, religion has been receiving renewed and widespread public and scientific attention, while one area of research has rarely been touched on within the debate: so-called 'alternative', individualised forms of religion, usually not only regarded as being the concern of the single, private person, and combining more or less freely chosen individual beliefs and practices, but also as not a very fruitful object to look at when it comes to assumptions about broader shifts in the relationship between religion and society nowadays.

I will, to the contrary, argue below that these forms of religion not only may be substantially relevant within the 'post-secularity' paradigm in terms of belief structures and ways in which the individual deals with believing (see Bochinger 1994), but, similarly to the findings of Hubert Knoblauch (2009), also in terms of visibility on the level of semantics, for which reason it is worthwhile to pay them some attention.

Within the wider context of contemporary spiritual practice or esotericism, individuals can be observed (not only in Germany but also elsewhere), who combine different kinds of alternative healing practices in order to gain or maintain physical and mental health, well-being, success and autonomy. These practices were said to take place only within the very private sphere, partly because those beliefs do not change the everyday lifestyles of individuals significantly, at least in comparison with the much more formative traditional religions[1]. These practices are often connected to discernibly spiritual or religious, often inconsistent combinations of beliefs that contain a 'multiple

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1   Expression taken from Wood 2006.

salvation logic' which is used by the actors themselves to explain why they act in certain ways. At the same time, key features of 'secular rationality' are a central aspect as well; for example, the level of semantics, which here is 'the secular', is a category actively and deliberately, though implicitly applied, positively defined (for example, as scientific) and constantly placed in relation to the categories of 'spiritual' and 'religious'. These also are transformed, but always remain structurally recognisable within the differently reported world-views, especially if one considers instrumental rationality as something widely associated with the 'secular' in contrast with the 'religious' or 'spiritual'.

This paper aims to systematically show, firstly, the different versions of salvation logic and reasoning of action within individual world-views, and secondly it focuses on examples of the semantics used in reports of individuals' own world-views. Thirdly, against this backdrop, the term 'post-secular', understood in this way, as opposed to its original meaning, will be discussed in order to point out former limits and some new possibilities when this term is used as a description of current forms of religion.

A re-emerging 'magical garden'?

Within the discussions about the term 'post-secular', my approach is based on the 'return of the repressed' thesis. It assumes that modern forms of religious belief are re-emerging forms of religion that have always been there, but were suppressed by Christian dominance (Gorski 2005: 180).

Philip Gorski compares the contemporary 'magical garden' with the religious pluralism of ancient Rome from which viewpoint diverse beliefs exist simultaneously, and in themselves also refer to concepts of immanence and transcendence such as are found in Thomas Luckmann's[2] (cf. Figure) scheme of 'multiple transcendences'. The latter means that diverse beliefs refer to different ranges of transcendence in contrast to the ideally homogeneously presumed otherworldly transcendence of the former Christian vision (Gorski 2005: 184). I work with these assumptions in the sense that I recognise the possibility (*sic*) of a similar situation in the historical past and I use the concept of 'multiple transcendence' with a dominance of inner-worldliness as a description of the religious landscape today.

2   For further reading see, e.g., Luckmann 2002: 139–54.

Luckmann's concept of transcendence and Max Weber's 'Rational Actor'

Gorski proceeds in his article from the description of the contemporary and Roman religious landscapes to the question for the Weberian 'Rational Actor' within the modern situation: Weber, in his essay 'Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism' (1988: 17–206), said that it was in the belief that a divine, other-worldly salvation and individual predestination would manifest in worldly, that is to say, economic, success that individuals adopted a way of living which led to early capitalism. Weber draws his conclusions basically from the inherent logic of salvation regarding social organisation.

But how, if at all, Gorski asks, is Weber's claim concerning the connection of salvation belief and human action and life-conduct from the Protestant ethic valid for today's mostly inner-worldly oriented beliefs, situated as they are within individualised, alternative forms of religiosity? And what consequences might the extreme diversity of 'New Age' beliefs, which are only very weakly supported by visible institutions, but held by individuals who live within and are dominantly bound to the logic of secular institutions, have for research which is inspired by Max Weber (cf. Gorski 2005: 183)?

Approaching this from the direction of theories of action, it has to be acknowledged that it is not possible precisely to derive one's original motivation from one's own reports and reasoning, as the believer (as do people generally) tends to reason also with regard to the situations in which he or she gives those reports and may not be fully aware of all the factors that lead directly or indirectly to his/her own actions. Within Luckmann's work, which partly uses the Durkheimian approach, this has not been the focus of interest, while Max Weber compared social structures only when they had already become historical (in that the sum of certain actions had already become manifest) and found their connection with the salvation logic of the 'Protestant Ethic'. Thus, the analysis of interview material in this essay merely displays acting as religiously reasoned by the actor from a social constructionist perspective.

This is valuable for the study of religious practices for at least two reasons. Firstly, we gain insights into contemporary religious/spiritual practices actually through explanations as to how they work. This close connection of subjective description, explanation and practice becomes apparent within the longer interviews: though the persons interviewed often said 'I do it, because it works', they then reported further to me, how they explain to others and (admittedly) also to themselves often in detail and consistently, why a single practice actually does so. To me this indicates that it is only to a certain degree

acceptable[3] to commit to practices which might seem irrational or pointless, so that practice and explanation (belief) can be seen from this perspective as being closely connected.

Secondly, against the backlash of institutionally dominant secular world-views, this approach allows us to describe what kind(s) of religious rationalities are constructed by agents in the post-secular situation as described by Philip Gorski—no matter how formative single beliefs may become in practice and whether a certain action is really primarily grounded in those beliefs.

As we will see, the Weberian term 'salvation' is still useful here and plays a central role in the analysis. Its significance varies across the contemporary religious scene and may have different meanings or connotations for the same person.

The problem(s) of categorising 'belief' and phenomenological approaches

After some refinements have been made according to the empirical findings, the religious scenery as described by Gorski could be sketched out as follows:
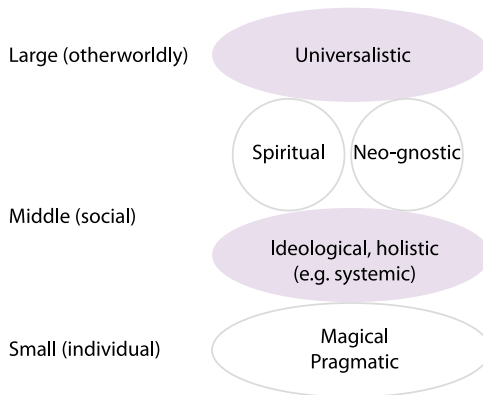
Varieties of transcendence

According to Luckmann's account, all levels of transcendence are assumed to provide meaning for social entities (cf. Berger & Luckmann 1994), which may be humanity as a whole or the individual, by identifying these entities in relation to a greater, or higher, meaningful context. This may mean, in a

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3   This may be seen as an alternative focus to Detlef Pollack's argument that modernity would go together with a generally high tolerance for inconsistencies (Pollack 2009: 303). I rather argue, that these inconsistencies are precisely partly dealt with in ways shown below.

religious context, being created by an ideal god, or stemming from a higher energy or truth; or belief in the powers wielded by a magician, or in energies one connects with in order to be healed on the individual level. At the middle or social level, progress within the social world is usually associated with the belief concerned.

The systematisation of beliefs is based on Luckmann and on rather old-fashioned theological terminology, simply because this was probably the most differentiated terminology available and would therefore better approach the 'multiple transcendence' suggested by Gorski.

Though the basic structure has been refined by means of empiricism, the systematisation is to be understood as a merely theoretical construct; the Weberian *Idealtypen* (ideal type), and it is used as an analytical tool that provides a structure for the material. But those categories are to be found only as variations and mixtures within empiricism, thus the terms do not provide categories to designate any 'real' religion or belief.

Differentiation between religious/spiritual and secular semantics

Within the analysis, in order to be able to sever parts of the multiple religious rationality from secular instrumental rationality, I try to differentiate between beliefs that are, within religious studies, 'traditionally' recognised as being similar to classical categories such as 'magical', 'spiritual-ideological' (also: holistic or systemic), otherworldly, transcendent and (neo-)Gnostic in terms of their logic of salvation. They are themselves, concerning their semantics, here severed from world-views that would, regarding their semantics, generally be described as 'secular', or at least not apparently religious, spiritual or magical from the classical point of view. I do so in contrast to the Luckmannian approach. This way, it is also possible to avoid Luckmann's too broad definition of religion and to differentiate between world-views in Western countries, which can be counted as dominant ('secular') and alternative[4] (here 'religious' and 'spiritual') on the institutional level. Furthermore, this differentiation was necessary to designate that which is specifically 'new'

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4   Hubert Knoblauch uses the expression 'religious semantics' to identify individual
     religiosity and to separate it from what he considers to be 'non-religiosity', but in a
     much broader sense than I do here. In Knoblauch's book *Populäre Religion* (2009)
     it is still too much based on a free interpretation concerning the difficult question,
     what decides what is 'religious' and what is not. This is why I have decided to ori-
     entate my understanding of religion on conventions about what is observed mainly
     within religious studies. This is not a perfect solution, but it certainly leads to more
     comprehensible results.

in the contemporary religious situation, and which will be discussed in more depth below.

The distinction made in contrast to Luckmann is to be understood in the sense of the 'ideal-typical' as well. In the second part of the analysis, I will give some examples for this differentiation.

Methods and samples

In the following I will present parts of selected case studies in the form of semi-standardised interviews made at esoteric fairs in Germany.[5]

The selection of subjects at the level of the field of study was made according to at least three aspects: 1) the subject's range activity and role in the field, specifically, subjects were selected on the basis of being interested in and occupied with more than one practice for, 2), more than two years, 3) without being a professional. I chose according to these three aspects in order to make sure that the interest in the field on the part of the subject is more or less a serious one and also to include only people who would probably have only a minimal economic interest and not so much of a salesman *habitus*. The last point is important in order to improve the chances of investigating not just advertising strategies, but actually the things people believe in seriously, as economic purpose and belief can, though need not necessarily be, interwoven. Furthermore, I also tried to cover a wide socio-economic demographic, although I did not follow this attempt too systematically.

In another respect, it was important to cover a wide range of types of world-view according to the theoretical framework explained above, in short: pragmatic, ideological and universal types and their combinations, as well as Gnostic, spiritual or 'alternative theories'.

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5   The standardisation was accomplished with a modified and extended version of the Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark's 'Five dimensions of religiosity' model in combination with the 'structural model of religiosity' by Ulrich Oevermann (1996: 29–40) in order to exemplify some kinds of salvation logics in the contemporary situation.

Multiple salvation logics and self-empowerment

To show what is understood by 'salvation' and how different interpretations of the term may be held together by a single individual, I chose three persons that cover all three ranges of transcendence with a different emphasis. The investigation was broader, but for the purpose of describing understandings of salvation, it will be sufficient to shed light (including literal quotes) on six aspects:

1. The individual's beliefs and practices;
2. the meaning he/she sees in life, which is usually split across and subsidiary to
3. the aims they see as being important to achieve (Weber's *Heilsziel*) and
4. the ways/practices by which these are believed to be achieved (*Heilsweg*).

And within the esoteric/spiritual range,

5. the reasons why they started to be interested in esoteric practices or spirituality; and
6. the benefits they expect to gain are also of central importance.

Three examples[6]

P1's (male, around 40 years old, self-employed engineer) world-view is relatively complex and combines all ranges of transcendence: he comes from a Protestant background, claims to be a non-believer and views many features of Christianity quite critically, though he admits to praying to God every now and then. He imagines God to be an energy which he uses himself when applying Reiki on others.[7] It also has an otherworldly character, as the trans-

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6   The interview material was collected by myself in March–April 2008 during the so-called *Esoterik-Messen* (esoteric fairs) which are in Berlin and Lübeck, Germany. This paper is based mainly on these interviews. Those interviews that provided the quotes for the text here, are signified as P1 (Person 1), P2, P3 and P4. The material is originally in German and the translation has been done by myself. The original material can be found as an appendix of my MA thesis, which is in my possession and can be consulted by contacting me.

7   P1: 'I also believe that—quotation marks—God exists. A so-called "divine energy", that practically contains All in One, so to say.' C: 'Is that a personal God?' P1: 'No. That is practically something that includes everything. Everything one can imagine.'

formation of the universe is imagined in a very abstract way ('the unfolding rose') and as lying in the future, which is reminiscent of some key topics in classical Gnosticism.[8] He believes that every soul has a duty to perfect itself via self-chosen experiences and such souls, developing simultaneously, will lead to a perfect universe consisting of pure light-energy. He further stresses his belief in 'the law of attraction' concerning human community: this law would implement itself more and more according to the development of the human soul. The (parallel) effort in concentrating on and following that law in the beginning (i.e. now) would become unnecessary in the future with the further development of the universe. In that later state, no laws at all would be needed in human society.

This world-view can, due to its abstract ideals and social transcendence, be categorised as partly universalistic, or even Gnostic, and holistic. Into the latter category, I also include belief in God as an energy that may be transmitted by human beings and can lead to what he understands as 'healing', because it manifests, in his words, the strong connection he believes exists between humans and the universe.

> P1: Yes, I dim my perception of the outer environment a bit, and search practically for a ray of light above. One to God, one to my heart and once to the earth, so that I am connected to them. I mean, connected to the earth and to the divine energy.

The 'law of attraction' also has a very strong pragmatic, technically magical notion: according to him, this implies that if a person improves him/herself, he/she can get anything he/she desires, while being strongly emotionally excited; for example a car or, occasionally, some parking space or a lost key, or contact with certain people:

> P1: Well, they say of the things one wishes for very strongly, that when one imagines how it will be after one has achieved them; when mind and emotion work closely together, that those things will come to be.

Pragmatic/magical elements also play a major role when he addresses his wishes to the universe. This would need conscious concentration and the de-

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8   P1: 'That is abandoning the Christian god, belief in a transcendent truth behind this god, the human being that takes part in the divine energy and the individual salvation process, which triggers the transformation of the universe.'

termination to strengthen himself or solve concrete, worldly problems. When he began, he had not had any crucial experience, but rather felt his interest in experimenting with light and energy work developing slowly. Through this, he was hoping to gain a richer life with more love and energy in it. Since then, his life has been emotionally enriched, and his range of perception has also been broadened. As a result, he also feels he has become a much more interesting person, much more optimistic and courageous in decisions concerning his life, because he feels he has the strength to get things right if something turns out not to work. Now he has a much better job, as well as the car he had always wanted. The serving of his personal purposes and aims can, to some extent also be dedicated for the practical application of healing and helping others. It is something that makes him a specialist, since he himself is the locus where the special power is to be located. Hence he becomes important for others and he explicitly perceives this as raising his social attractiveness. The former at first serves his worldly needs and supports his personal growth, which makes up a huge part of what he designates as the primary meaning of life—personal perfection.

'Salvation' for P1 seems hence to have a threefold meaning: firstly, the transformation of his very own situation and his personal features and skills, which is closely connected, secondly, to an improvement of society and thirdly, the transformation of the universe. The practices he uses, such as concentration, meditation, imagination, are not something unique to his beliefs, but used chiefly for pragmatic purposes. He becomes, in his view, someone special who can deal with divine energies, as well as be more courageous and able to cope with his own life (healed and empowered), which means personal salvation and is, at the same time, a condition for the development and salvation of everything else.

P2 (female; in her late 20s, a self-financing student, pregnant at the time the interview was made) I chose this person as an example of a seeming lack of otherworldly transcendence and her beliefs rather fit the categories holistic and pragmatic. She says she does not believe in God as a concept at all, but found the stories from the Bible that she had been told her during her upbringing quite salutary at the time. Today she, like P1, practises energy work which she regards as necessary means for taking care of her own mental health. Additionally, she meditates regularly, which basically includes any practice of conscious relaxation and focussing on herself, and she also has made use of a list other therapies such as massage, acupuncture, homeopathy and others. For her, physical problems are usually connected to psychological stress or social problems and the body and the psyche are seen as closely connected entities.

> P3: By energy work I only mean. . .that sometimes your body gives signals one should take seriously, because body and psyche are connected very closely to each other. I mean, somehow everything is connected. And I believe, that many people who are chronically ill often have a psychological or emotional problem which they cannot cope with, or which they ignore.

Only personal subjectivity is sacred, while she believes everything else is connected via a collective unconscious and a special energy. This, to some extent, seems to be accessible, as she mentions on another occasion that she feels able to connect energetically to close friends (and sometimes to strangers), which brings warmth to her life that she says otherwise would be missing. Energetically, everything in the world desires to get into energetic balance with its environment, so, the consequences of a person's actions should be expected to return to him or her. She says she uses astrology a lot, as an alternative system of knowledge which can explain her daily impressions and perceptions (that other types of knowledge cannot explain reasonably for her) and she also uses Tarot as a means to reflect more systematically on the events in her life. She had started to work with the former when she was only 13 years old and received a book on astrology as a present. At that time she describes herself as being extremely sensitive and easily irritated by other people's behaviour, and astrology explained to her the strong differences she felt between herself and others. It continues to help her to understand what is going on, especially between people and people and herself every day.

> P2: . . .I already see, when we are in Aries, I see that more conflicts are likely to happen, because that's how it is mostly, very often, then I just have to discipline myself a bit more. . .I once worked in a pub, and the folks—I noticed how they regularly freaked out on nights of the full moon, getting completely drunk, staying out longer, ranting much more. . .

She got to know Tarot later and says it was a kind of meditation, helping her to make decisions and working against the confusion in her mind:

> P2: . . .Tarot. . .that is, as I said, more for an emergency, when I am a little in a crisis, that I get out to calm me down: when I doubt, then those are taken out [those are used].

All the practices she uses primarily seem to serve her mental and physical health and her well-being, from the point of view that she has always more or less perceived her being in the world as problematic. She also says she sees no meaning beyond mere biological reproduction, as the human consciousness disappears when the body dies, and personal growth is for the sake of personal confidence and one's immediate environment. It is about 'making the best of it'. Therefore, to her, astrology and Tarot are means of coping with the resulting confusion for her that by now have become, like energy work and other therapies, her first means of choice for coping with her (mental) experience in everyday life. She actually goes so far as to accept some difficulties in communicating with other people (including her husband) that don't deploy or accept the concepts and explanations for situations that she makes use of.

Concerning the concept of salvation, we find here a strongly pessimistic attitude towards the world and its living conditions within, the topic of balancing energy to achieve a comfortable environment and several strategies of 'healing' to keep herself in balance, that is to say to cope with more or less individual problems in her surroundings, and so are alternative knowledge systems (astrology used). Those, as well as Tarot, serve as a basis for interpretation in making decisions about which way she is going to act in certain situations. Hence, there is no salvation as such, but far more a concern with coping with and resolving the problems of her being on the individual and social level.

P3 (female, approximately 45 years old, works as a theriapist) mainly holds a 'systemic' world-view which predominantly stresses the interconnectedness of everything, so that everything a person does will have consequences for him/her in reverse, as well as the importance of an equality of chances and of confidence in the life of a person as well as having an ecological consciousness.[9]

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9   P3: 'Yes. So the imagination is, that we, humans—as does everything else within
     nature as well – move in systems. I say that within nature we know systems, as for
     example that "hares eat grass". Those hares are then likewise eaten by foxes or other
     animals, and they themselves have other enemies, by whom they are eaten. Those
     chains are part of an overall system, and as soon as one part drops out of it, it has
     an impact on the whole system. When it happens that the natural enemies of a
     species disappear, this species will expand without limit. This has the reverse effect
     on their food source—if we take those rabbits, for example. We know about this
     problem from Australia, where rabbits have no natural enemies. There it really was
     a problem, because the rabbits dug so many tunnels in the ground and ate the food
     of other animals that needed it. These are now in danger of disappearing completely,
     or something like that. This idea is like a mobile, where, if a part of a system changes,

Accordingly, it seems necessary for everyone to act responsibly within his/her immediate environment. Her own confidence is very important to her, and for that reason she also meditates every now and then. What she believes from the spiritual range is rather preserved for herself:

> P3: Yes, I try. . .That is something, I deal with by myself. So, I simply believe. . .yes, that there are energies, we cannot estimate. Which are higher and bigger. And carry more meaning. Yes [giggling]. . .something divine. And. . .I don't know, but the Christian Church by now has gone so far that it also says that God happens between people. So more in that direction.

'Systemic therapies' which focus on solving the individuals' problems in connection to their domestic environment are now a more or less recognised form of therapy in Germany. Unlike older forms of psychological therapy which come from traditions that include a strong notion of authority (psychoanalysis would be a good example), these are not concerned with spotting the individuals' failures. In terms of the proposed categories, her world-view is predominantly holistic and lacks any kind of otherworldly transcendence, while the need for improving the world as it is now is emphasised. She decided to become a therapist later in life due to her own experiences during her childhood (which took place in the mid-1970s in Germany), when she had experienced the consequences of problems within her family that remained unspoken about, but could have been solved, in her opinion. Also, she mentions that her environment was not open to her problems then and she wants to help others with their problems, having solved her own. Her main aim is to achieve confidence in life, which can be achieved by acting rightly and responsibly (according to systemic assumptions). This also would have a positive impact on the world as a whole and on herself at the same time. Identifying the therapies she practices as her profession also defines her social status.

On the one hand, salvation here basically involves keeping the world and nature in a good condition for one's descendants and on the other hand, to raise the current quality of life for oneself. Again, 'healing' is a central topic, first as self-help, then as practised professionally on others.

it has impact on all the other parts. This is, basically, transferred to human views via systemic therapies, so to say, on human groups. On the family, working groups, or on nations, or the world.'

First conclusion: a structural dominance of belief in practices

The first central result of the investigation is, that Philip Gorski's thesis about the existence of multiple transcendence within individualised religiosity in modernity could be empirically proven and exemplified as valid. Though this systematisation can only provide a relatively rough description of the real diversity of contemporary world-views within the field of non-institutionalised spirituality and esotericism.

In terms of the Weberian concept of salvation, a huge part of post-secular religious practices of this kind are not referring to great transcendent, ideal principles, which exist in sharp contrast to the world as it is now. On the contrary, they mostly refer to several inner-worldly ideas on the individual or social level, that do not have to be connected to each other in a consistent manner, nor do they provide an overall meaning for human life.

It is far more concerned with social change and improving one's immediate environment, in terms of 'making it more loving', 'warm' and/or more 'fairminded'. Often the aim 'to make the world a more spiritual place' is phrased, which includes notions of sensitivity, emotionality and the wish for a human community which one can 'feel'. This is one side of the inner-worldly orientation of contemporary religion (another example would be the enhanced political participation of religious groups, including the smaller ones), on the one hand, and reveals the importance of research on community construction in this field. On the other hand—and this is of more interest to me—here one can see the individual in relation to issues of self-transcendence that mostly manifests as self-help or individual empowerment.

A key issue here is that within the beliefs of all these persons as well as others I cannot present due to a lack of space and time, we find pragmatic elements serving the purpose of healing, strengthening, improving life quality and facilitating interpretations which help with making decisions and creating the possibility for individuals to act in a world that is no longer perfectly understood. As is apparent from the material presented above, all people are, to different degrees of urgency, aiming at improving their quality of life within a secular environment and therefore apply alternative therapies, and, so to say, 'magical' techniques:[10] P2 expresses a quite urgent need for alternative

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10   The classical religion–magic dichotomy shall be abandoned here, following Marcel Mauss (1989: 58), as ritual performance can be both magical and religious, depending on the ritual context (cf. pp. 52–8). In this case of modern, individualised religion, I will instead deal with a 'religio–magical continuum' and base my understanding on this. Here, magic is always practised as part of a world-view, be it religious or non-religious, and the contextual conditions mentioned by Mauss, that turn rites

coping strategies for several occasions, which are different forms of alternative healing or different systems of knowledge that provide a working frame of interpretation for her everyday life. P1 believes in his ability to connect to 'divine energy' that can even enable him to consciously influence things that happen around him. He re-binds that to the belief in some universal law and states that everyone has the potential to do this, but still perceives himself as to some extent a special person in having developed the practice. All say that they knew they were right as soon as the application of certain practices worked out,[11] so pragmatism seems to be significantly dominant over abstract idealism.

From the perspective presented here, Weber's 'Rational Actor' has become an 'Irrational Actor' who does not understand the world as it is (nor is he able to interpret it coherently) and moves; who faces many different authorities, meanings and opinions about what is 'right' and is working on the exhausting project of dealing with uncertainties and the apparent absence of a reliable truth for the individual person. The pragmatic elements within world-views serve as healing strategies and strategies also of magical empowerment. At the same time, they may be beliefs, but they are basically beliefs in which a practice serves the desired purpose—belief in salvation as an abstract principle has become to some extent a belief in the means, in terms of Max Weber's *Zweckrationalität* or—as often used in contexts beyond religion—'instrumental rationality', which is considered to be the dominant type in contemporary everyday life.

Gorski's as well as Luckmann's 'multiple transcendence' may be seen as significant for one type of modern, individualised religious world-view within the range of non-institutionalised spirituality.

into magical rites do not have the same meaning in the Western world today. Those may be practised privately, but are not secret or even forbidden (cf. Mauss 1989: 58).

11 Cf. Corrywright (2003) on 'New Age' and the relationship between religious/spiritual experience and doctrine: 'By "prior" I mean chronologically prior in the sense that a spiritual experience of the world leads to a search for doctrines and beliefs that support this experiential understanding' (p. 8).

Religious and secular semantics, reasoning and social belonging (or non-belonging)

The relevance of semantics applied

The analysis of constructed religious rationality shows that salvation logic within the 'new religious scenery'[12] in Germany is multiple, with a dominance of instrumental rationality with the aim of self-empowerment in terms of improving one's life-conditions in several respects. Crucial for the discussion of post-secular religious practices is, on the one hand, this dominance of small transcendences and self-referential reasoning in religious behaviour, and on the other the hand the parallel occurrence of different types of salvation logic in one individual world-view. Gorski assumes that this is much the same situation as pertained within the Roman Empire. Whether this is the case or not is difficult to judge, as the systematisation he proposes is quite schematic and rough, and it is meant to make historical comparisons possible.

Surely the scope of beliefs in terms of content is different today, as there is different material from different religious traditions available and as individualised forms of specialism within the field have evolved which reinterpret or create the meaning of content. This takes place to some extent also on the level of relatively widespread publications (written by 'New-Age theorists' or 'pre-thinkers'), but mainly on a personal level to create an individual world-view, often drawing on the books of the former. Individual consumers of the material can engage with it in the same way. But beyond the question of validity, this statement by Gorski affords an answer also in terms of some examples at the level of semantics, in order to show what is actually different in the contemporary situation.

Examples from the material

After already having made an attempt to differentiate 'ideal-typically' between the terms 'religious' and 'secular' above, I get into trouble (as expected and according to my decision to let quasi official agreements within religious studies decide what is 'religious' in a classical sense, on the empirical level) in terms of how to categorise, for example, alternative pseudo-scientific theories here, as they contain spiritual and religious elements, but may at the same time tend to have atheistic notions and/or reject traditional religions such as Christianity and/or claim to be scientific themselves. Additionally, they also belong, as they are usually not officially recognised as scientific, technically in

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12   Term from Bochinger 1994.

the realm of speculation and belief and in other respects belong neither to the category 'religious' as described above, nor to the category 'secular' as it is understood as the dominant kind of recognized knowledge. Another difficulty lies in the fact that in practice, in Germany, some of those alternative theories concerning healing among others have even entered university departments, and therapies applying them are in fact more and more recognised (in terms of acceptance from health insurance companies), but this development is still criticised by many.[13] Therefore they may themselves be regarded as something in between, precisely, those elements that can be most easily accepted by the majority. One might say, they are *the* indicators of a blurring between secular and religious contents. In terms of Max Weber or Niklas Luhmann, they can also be designated as signs of cultural 'de-differentiation' within a (quite) limited area, or, from the perspective of cultural studies in general, as an impact which alternative practices have on mainstream culture.

The material displays at least three relevant areas: firstly, what I just said about the use of scientific and holistic vocabularies, as well as beliefs about an interconnectedness of science and spirituality; secondly, a constant dealing with and relating to both realms consciously, and thirdly, self-locating in secular and religious/spiritual social environments (basically networks). For each area at least one example will be given here. The interviews are the same, or taken from the same series as above.

Example(s) 1: spirituality, science and medicine

> C: How can I picture that? So you say, the earth consists of energy fibres?
> P1: Yes, so somebody has once more proven scientifically that matter itself contains mostly a vacuum. So, the distance between an electron and an atom is so huge, that actually an atom, on the whole, consists of nothing. And it is, for this reason, the same with everything we see around us. Most of it is nothing. Though we see it because something holds it together.
> C: Is it known what that is?
> P1: Well, for that reason it is energy. We are again at this point.

P1 uses a terminology that stems from physics, such as 'electrons' and 'atoms', and speaks of (divine) energy to describe his world-view at the same time, presenting a very consistent picture of the universe.

13   http://www.zeit.de/zeit-wissen/2011/04/Dossier-Esoterik-Esoterisierung (accessed on 4 June 2011).

C: Do you think there is some kind of higher reality?

P2: Er, now we are as human beings more dense, in a form, as we have a form, yes we are more dense, as well our molecules, so to say, if it is water . . .or, we are pressed into a form. The other, this supernatural reality, that moves freely around, if those are spirit, I think one can say matter. That does not mean that everything is materialised, but that within us a lot of this moves (already), that influences all of us somehow. Yes, this is possible, that's why there is nuclear radiation or—whatever. Well this thing is the same, it influences one somehow. And that there is in any case a connection, that is underestimated by humankind. And that humans—oh Christ! I sound so ecologically concerned now—destroy the planet, I mean we kill ourselves when we destroy our environment.

P2 argues in a similar manner when describing that which lies in between 'matter' (physics) as energy or possibly as spirit, which is similar to nuclear radiation, being everywhere, influencing things, probably mostly people.

P3: Mhm. . .You know the issue of networking?. . .There is a wisdom, or a saying often applied in this context. If you know six people in the whole world, you know everyone. Because via these six people and their connections to other people one would be connected to any person in the world. I myself cannot test that, and also I don't want to do so. In fact, I don't mind. . .you could also use other sayings, like: one always meets twice, or so. . .I simply believe this makes sense, to treat oneself and life well and responsibly, because everything you do comes back to to you in the end. And this is a perfectly egotistical view, if I do it therefore. I treat my environment well, I can do that for pretty egotistical reasons. Because I treat myself well at the same time.

P3 refers to social networks as a modern term, but states at the same time that she cannot, and does not want to test whether certain statements might be explained by that concept. She says she likes the idea feels that there is some truth in it.

Example(s) 2: explicitly dealing with and relating to both realms consciously

P1: Spirituality means dealing with things you can't grasp [understand] completely, but which have, from my observation, a great deal of influence on life, because there are many things you also feel intuitively. . .

C: Do you believe science and spirituality contradict each other? Or. . .

P1: No, I believe that science will continue to develop towards holism.

C: So spirituality and science go together?. . .

P1: Those borders only exist within a limited timespan. That means, until now, science cannot imagine certain things. But they will become explicable because of development. See, in the fifteenth century nobody could imagine that the earth was a sphere and could stand upside down. Well, now it is explicable.

P1 explains at some point explicitly that for him, spirituality and science are a unity. Also, his strong belief in science and the human ability to understand the universe becomes apparent; although he believes that it lies in the future and can only be imagined at the moment. I interpret his words further in the sense that spirituality has the task of sensing and imagining something while science has the task of explaining it. Imagination is certainly important when scientific research takes place on a scale that does not allow direct observation or laboratory tests. Quantum physics is an example concerned with that problem, discussed within the 'New Age' context widely and made popular by Fritjof Capra in the late 1970s and early 1980s.[14]

Example(s) 3: social environment (negative reactions)

P2: Well, it is of course not what the rational world wants to hear from you, I mean 'you are Capricorn/ascendent: Aquarius'—no one gives a f***. Even if I try to make my own world more understandable with this for myself. . .with. . .this system of symbols. But whenever I have been trying to tell others, it has mostly been rejected. There is no explanatory power in that.

P2: And actually, those are things other people regard as 'esoteric'. . .my husband, if he gets really angry when we talk, he comes up with something like 'Don't start with the moon, now!'. . .

P4[15]: . . .well, since I have noticed that others think of this as superstition I take myself back a bit, in addressing others actively and directly. Many say: this is dangerous, but when you only got to know that recently, you wanted to heal the whole world and so on.

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14 See e.g. Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* (1975), which is available now in more than 20 languages and more than 40 editions.

15 P4 is male, about 50 years old, self-employed driver.

> C: Hmhm. . .
>
> P4: Right? Er, so recently I've stayed more calm with that. I know people from the internet, with whom I can talk about it and exchange energetically.

These last examples point at problems some people face in their social environment: be it that they do not feel understood because of using different semantics, or face negative reactions in the course of their practice. The second person (three) accordingly treats his beliefs in special communities and networks (only); three has friends or networks that share her beliefs but she also tries to get her semantics through to people who don't share them. The other interviewees seem to be better adapted to their environment, or at least did not mention reactions or processes. But almost all of them said that they have some kind of special network/community/circle of friends, one very prevalent way of dealing with the difficulty of not being understood.

The brief passages chosen here were only examples of the areas of practical mixing between the secular and religious/spiritual within the descriptions of certain topics, while this could be shown already in other sources, especially books that describe and discuss the core theories on which many ideas the individual believers follow are based.

Second conclusion: relating religion and spirituality with the secular

At the level of semantics, which I only aim to exemplify briefly here, we find secular and religious expressions on the surface, as well as active reasoning from both areas and the conscious relating of both realms behind that. This might take place in theorising the world, or in social practice in terms of positioning oneself and others.

Semantics, as well as special topics, also appear within public discourse; thus the mixing and conscious relating of secular and religious issues has become more strongly visible. Talking about beliefs or using religious semantic language is no longer only done by collective religious actors (i.e. mostly within their respective groups), but becomes apparent also in the public interactions of diverse religious individuals and are more or less easily accessible for everyone (cf. Knoblauch 2009: 207–10; see also footnote 4).

Their visibility is not yet a political one, though among some of them might tend to support left-wing parties because of ecological concerns. The current potential for collective political action within this *milieu* has yet to be explored. 'Visibility' here amounts to a still somewhat diffuse presence on

the market[16] as well as acceptance by official institutions such as health insurance companies or even health departments of universities,[17] the presence and acceptance of spiritual semantics in public discourse,[18] their increasing use within open, face-to-face discussions and the legitimacy and necessity of their use to describe common emotional attitudes within the perception of one's environment.

The 'post-secular' in alternative, individualised religiosity

In the first conclusion, I aimed to show that the Weberian 'Rational Actor', as referred to by Philip Gorski, has nowadays in fact become a 'Multiple Rational Actor' who has to use different points of reference when reasoning about his/her own actions and explaining his/her world-view. But this ideal-typical figure has has also become something which I may call the 'Irrational Actor' according to the extent he/she is able to describe his/her reality consistently and in how far acting may be based on a consistent system of meaning. This is not given anymore in the contemporary situation within this non-institutionalised and individualised form of religion, where no single religion or world-view possesses an overall, formative power[19]. Today, we find individuals, who are 'thrown back' on themselves and into the effort of making sense out of their situation, and seemingly as a consequence, we find ideologies of self-improvement in connection to strategies of self-help remaining dominant. The individual person has to be not only master of his/her own world-view and life, but also wants to achieve special, supernatural skills in order to cope better with this necessity and even extend this role towards other people. Some varieties of that logic can easily be designated as 'magical', and the applicator of those practices a 'magician' in the classical sense. Within Thomas Luckmann's theoretical framework, this special role of the person takes him/herself via self-referential experiences into the transcendent realm, as specialist who also has a religious function that goes beyond their everyday life. Furthermore, if practices that aim at individual healing, well-being and personal development for the purpose of self-empowerment do include being active as an expert who is also able to carry out those special actions on/for

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16 Cf. Bochinger 1994: 30.
17 http://www.zeit.de/zeit-wissen/2011/04/Dossier-Esoterik-Esoterisierung (accessed on 20 June 2011).
18 Knoblauch 2009: 207–10.
19 Terminology following Wood 2006.

others, the double purpose of an increase of social capital and personal well-being is achieved.

As pointed out above, the structure of belief may not, according to Gorski, be historically new, as the former 'New Age' beliefs can be analysed by means of an application of traditional categories and their combinations, but it has to be kept in mind that those categories are quite rough and lack a comparison with the concrete topics dealt with. Also needing to be taken into account is the impossibility of direct and quantitative research for past times: historical comparative statements are therefore on the one hand inclined to be fated to stay vague and 'ideal-typical', while they may be helpful tools for the analysis on the other hand.

What can certainly be said to be new is the contemporary role and position of religion within Western society, as well as that religious engagement, the way of dealing with one's own beliefs constitutes a characteristic of special interest here.

The boundaries between the religious/spiritual and the secular are constantly related to each other, mostly with binary terms like 'me', 'we' and 'the others'; 'the majority', or 'the social world' becoming increasingly blurred, which would not be necessary if there had not been and would not be a dominance of other, secular world-views. Within the case-studies presented above, it becomes apparent what this means for individuals in their daily practice of thinking, reflecting and interaction: all individuals (have to) deal with their beliefs in broader categories that implicitly refer to each other, such as the 'religious', the 'spiritual' and the 'normal' ('secular'). Secularity is here a meta-category that is to be taken into account on the level of reasoning and communication as well as for a self-definition and self-positioning in different networks, even more and towards an increased number of other actors after the main churches have lost a great deal of their dominance (Gorski 2005: 161 ff.). Spiritual or religious knowledge and practices are approached and legitimised in a seemingly scientific manner and religious and secular semantics are all used to express one's beliefs.

At the same time individuals locate themselves as participants within religious and secular environments, networks or contexts, in which they actively participate. The differentiation between religious and secular is implicitly drawn within the expressions by the individuals interviewed themselves, that is to say, in how far they differ or accommodate the dominant views of their environment, though the term secular itself is rarely mentioned as such. Thus, and more importantly, in order to discuss the idea of 'post-secularity', the mixed religious and secular elements should be looked at more precisely, as

the uses of both terminologies may provide more insights of the relation of religiosity/spirituality and the secular at least within this field.

Furthermore, as also argued by Hubert Knoblauch (2009) and Christoph Bochinger (the latter especially for the 'New Age', 1995: 126–8), this process does not only take place in the very private sphere, where Luckmann located his 'Invisible Religion', but has become more visible and broadly acceptable. So the religious/secular boundaries have also become blurred on the cultural level, when spirituality becomes publicly expressed and up for discussion, mostly beyond the political level.

Therefore concerning the described practices of relating the religious and secular and the new mixing of secular knowledge and alternative beliefs, the term 'post-secular' is, from this perspective, an adequate and useful description as well for individualised and non-institutional forms of religion, with their constant relating of the religious/spiritual and the secular as a central characteristic and a central practice beyond political participation of religions in the Habermasian sense.

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