We have seen over the last two decades or so a resurgence of work in the sociology of religion in Germany. While there was not a single chair specializing in the discipline before 1990 (the sociology of religion was practiced within general sociology or practical theology as at best a minor subject), there are now over five. And, while the discipline was not represented within the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie (German Sociological Association) in the 1970s and 1980s, it has now had an independent section since 1995 and a current membership of about 200 academics publishing in the field. The discipline now also has a presence in the leading German sociological journals, and there are book series specializing in it. The discipline has broadened its thematic scope, performs classic exegesis as well as clarifying basic disciplinary concepts, carries out both empirical research and theoretical work, has connected with discussions in general sociology, and is now in contact with related disciplines, such as religious studies, political science, anthropology, history, and theology. It absorbs research results from the international context, and in particular from the sociology of religion in the English-speaking world, makes use of a considerable methodological pluralism and even maintains its own internal controversies—about, for example, the concept of religion, secularization theory, the individualization thesis, and methodological questions. The sociology of religion that is currently practiced in German is underrepresented internationally, however; this is not only due to the language barrier, but is also because the sociological market in Germany is comparatively large (larger certainly than it is in the Netherlands or in Sweden, for example), therefore making the incentive to publish in English weaker than it might otherwise be.

The resurgence of the sociology of religion since the 1990s has a number of causes. It has certainly something to do with the dominance of modernization theory in the 1960s and 1970s, which meant that interest in the issue of religion had been relatively low, not only in sociology but also in political science and history. Then came the cultural turn in the 1980s along with the related tendency to use interpretive methods, and the collapse of grand narrative, be it modernization, secularization or rationalization. Above all, though, the reason for the resurgence of the discipline lies in the increased attention given to the issue of religion in the public sphere. For the last two decades, and especially
since 9/11, people have become increasingly aware of the significant political role that religion plays in the conflicts of the world, the extent to which religion can be a medium for the unfolding of ethnic, economic and political conflicts, and the suitability that it has as a marker establishing social, cultural and political boundaries. In addition, public sensitivity toward the issue of religion has also increased as a result of the increasing migration of Muslims to Europe and the attendant integration issues and conflicts.

The development of the sociology of religion in Germany since 1945 can be roughly divided into three phases. The most recent phase has seen the resurgence of research activities in the sociology of religion just mentioned, and began more or less in the wake of German reunification. The first and second phases are separated by Thomas Luckmann's criticism of the narrowing of the sociology of religion to church sociology, a criticism that touched the concerns expressed in the work of Joachim Matthes and Trutz Rendtorff. The high point of this criticism came in the first half of the 1960s.

The Phase of Church Sociology: From the 1950s to the Mid-1960s

As in general sociology, the development of the sociology of religion in Germany after 1945 is characterized less by an attempt to link up with disrupted lines of continuity than by efforts to seek a fresh start. After the catastrophe of the Second World War, the awareness prevailed among academics of being not only in a radically new political and social landscape but also in a fundamentally altered mental situation, one that made it necessary to redefine the very place of sociology. The ideas of Weber, Simmel and Troeltsch seemed to be of little help when sociologists came to address the post-1945 situation, and Helmut Schelsky (1959: 84), looking back at the new beginning of German sociology after 1945, could declare: “Not only had the theories of the last few decades faded with the ideologies; the social realities themselves had entered into such changed constellations that obtaining new perspectives and experiences was really the order of the day for us.”

The rebuilding of the sociology of religion after the Second World War was initially very much, though not exclusively, the work of church and theological institutions. The Institut für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften (Institute for Christian Social Sciences) was established at the Faculty of Catholic Theology at the University of Münster in 1951, its first director being Joseph Hößnner. Four years later, the Institut für Christliche Gesellschaftswissenschaften (Institute for the Christian Science of Society) was founded with the appointment of Heinz-Dietrich Wendland, also at the University of Münster, but now at