CHAPTER 2

No Danger! The Current Re-evaluation of Religion and Luhmann’s Concept of Risk

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**Luhmann and the Observation of Religion**

Over the last two decades, communication about religion has broadly re-entered the political arena. This change is referred to as a so-called “return” (cf. Hatzopoulos 2003; Ebaugh 2002; Helco 2003) or “resurgence” (cf. Riesebrodt 2000) of religion, which is closely connected with a more general questioning of the idea of ever-advancing secularization. Simultaneously to religion returning to the agenda of political communication, a re-evaluation is also taking place. Religion is no longer perceived as a threat to be excluded from political communication. Instead, a perspective that views religion as carrying substantial potential as a useful political resource is increasingly taking hold. In this process, religion is increasingly presented as something that may lead to better political decisions and should therefore be acknowledged within political processes. It no longer appears as something uncontrollable, but rather as a governable matter. But how does this current re-evaluation of religion take place? Which argumentative strategies are applied to transform the meaning associated with the term and to create this new image of religion? What does this tell us about the internal communication strategies of the political system and its ability to incorporate potentially interfering factors and to stabilize itself? These questions are the focus of this chapter as it shows how the current image of religion is shifting.

A field that perfectly reflects the above-mentioned re-evaluation of religion is the field of development cooperation. This field will therefore serve as an example in this analysis and will help to illustrate the arguments this article

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1 The materials used to illustrate the theoretical considerations referred to here derive from a research project on understandings of ‘religion’ in German, Swiss, and Austrian developmental assistance. All of them are programmatic texts from this policy field, such as speeches, training handbooks, conference invitations, brochures, and presentations. They were produced by political actors active in development cooperation and published between the late
puts forward. In development cooperation, religion has long been characterized as a taboo, as something that disturbs secular organizations in doing their job properly and is to be avoided, since dealing with it might cause serious problems (cf. ver Beek 2000; Deneulin and Bano 2009). In the present, however, religion has come to be perceived as a phenomenon bearing considerable potential for development processes (Ma20: 5) and which thus should be viewed as a “powerful resource” that can have a positive impact (Ma30: 4). From the current perspective of practitioners in development cooperation, it is therefore necessary to emphasise the “civilising side of the sacred” (Ma8: 11) and to foreground its prospects and potentials. This is thought to leave room for decision-making, governability, and “creativity” (Ma13: 6) in dealing with religion within political processes.

Niklas Luhmann’s theoretical considerations allow us to take a closer look at the communicative shifts that currently surround the term religion. On the basis of his understanding of danger and risk, as well as Nassehi’s thoughts on risk communication, this chapter describes the communicative strategies that are applied in the discourse underlying this re-evaluation. It traces the current processes of re-evaluation and identifies the arguments used in transforming religion from a threat to be avoided into a risk that needs to be included in political processes, thus turning it into a governable phenomenon. Drawing on Luhmann’s systems-theoretical thinking and its possible applications to discourse analysis, the first section will sketch the theoretical background and the assumptions made. Based on Luhmann’s distinction between risk and danger, the second section of the chapter will show the mechanisms involved in the discursive practices that make religion appear as a risk rather than a danger. In the final section, I will discuss what this means for the actors involved in the field of political communication and for their capacity to act.

Selection of Risks
Following Niklas Luhmann, every social operation is based on distinction and therefore relies on self-reference and external reference. Systems that engage in these social operations are unable to observe the distinctions they use while they are using them. Metaphorically, Luhmann describes this as lying beyond the system’s horizon (Luhmann 1986: 23). According to Luhmann, it is nevertheless possible to look beyond this horizon and observe the distinctions...