Chapter 9

Religion and Science in Transformation: On Discourse Communities, the Double-Bind of Discourse Research, and Theoretical Controversies

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Unpacking Religion in Secular Environments

The narrative of secularization is a strange thing. On the one hand, scholars have argued that ‘modernization’ in ‘the West’ has led to a serious decline in religious convictions and practices; on the other hand, religion has continued to be an important element of public and private life in Europe and North America. A closer look at these dynamics reveals that the period between—roughly—1870 and 1950 was instrumental in creating new forms of religious understandings and practices, some of them outside of the more traditional institutionalized religions. These new understandings of religion fostered the emergence of a broad variety of religious communities (now often called ‘spiritual’ or ‘metaphysical’) in the second half of the twentieth century. A key element of the underlying dynamic is the fact that twentieth-century religious and spiritual convictions in Europe and North America make explicit use of scientific and secular interpretations of the world. Rather than constructing a clear distinction between religion and science, these understandings of religion incorporate scientific language into their own worldviews.

If we want to analyze the complex processes that have given religion a new place in contemporary European and North American culture, it is particularly helpful to apply the instruments of historical discourse analysis and of sociology of knowledge approaches to discourse (skad).¹ From this perspective, discourses are systematically organized forms of knowledge in a given community that are established, stabilized, and legitimized by communicative practices. These structures provide systems of meaning and regulate what is regarded as valid knowledge, be it explicit or tacit. Discourses are intrinsically

¹ On my understanding of discursive study of religion, see von Stuckrad 2013 (with further references); see also Neubert 2014. On skad, see Keller 2011. The discursive link between religion and science is also explored in von Stuckrad and Vollmer 2016 (forthcoming).
linked to dispositives that provide the communicative ‘infrastructure’ in which attributions of meaning become operative.

It is the reorganization of discourse strands that has given religion a new place in European and North American culture since the nineteenth century. To unpack this discursive constellation and to reconstruct its genealogy, it is necessary to have a close look at the ingredients of discursive knots and the re-entanglement of these ingredients, or discourse strands, in changing historical settings. This is a creative process that explores new ways of ordering historical sources. Such an unpacking and reorganization of data presents a new outline of what happened to religion in the twentieth century, very similar in its strategy to Michel Foucault’s program of deconstructing and reconstructing analytical frameworks:

The [...] purpose of such a description of the facts of discourse is that by freeing them of all the groupings that purport to be natural, immediate, universal unities, one is able to describe other unities, but this time by means of a group of controlled decisions. Providing one defines the conditions clearly, it might be legitimate to constitute, on the basis of correctly described relations, discursive groups that are not arbitrary, and yet remain invisible. [...] [I]t is not therefore an interpretation of the facts of the statement that might reveal [the relations], but the analysis of their coexistence, their succession, their mutual functioning, their reciprocal determination, and their independent or correlative transformations.

Discourses on religion that developed within secular frameworks are closely tied to ‘scientific’ ways of interpreting the world. When we disentangle and reconstruct discursive knots that have crystallized around the concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘science’, we can suggest new ‘unities’, again very much in line with Foucault’s understanding:

I [...] will do no more than this: of course, I shall take as my starting-point whatever unities are already given (such as psychopathology, medicine, or political economy); but I shall make use of them just long enough to ask myself what unities they form; by what right they can claim a field that specifies them in space and a continuity that individualizes them in time; according to what laws they are formed; against the background of which discursive events they stand out; and whether they are not, in their accepted and quasi-institutional individuality, ultimately the surface effect of more firmly grounded unities. I shall accept the groupings that