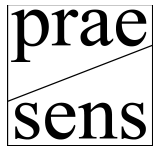
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Religion in Austria

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The emblems on the previous page and the front cover show widely used logos (Soka Gakkai International, the Unification Movement) and symbols, representing the religious context and the religious groups discussed in this volume. Permission to reproduce the logos has been granted by the respective organisations. The emblems signify (from left to right) Soka Gakkai International, Sephardic Jewry, the city of Vienna, the Unification Movement, and the Republic of Austria.

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Contents

Was Graz glaubt: Religion und Spiritualität in der Stadt.

by Anna Strobl. Theologie im kulturellen Dialog 19. Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 2010. Pp. 594. ISBN: 978-3-7022-3048-7. €29.00

Simon Steinbeiss

In the 1960s an intense debate commenced in the disciplines of Religious Studies and Sociology about the continuous decline of religion or religious commitment in European societies. Following concepts of thinkers like Max Weber (1864–1920), Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the process of secularisation was perceived as naturally accompanying modernisation (notable proponents of this assumption being Bryan Wilson and Peter Berger). Several aspects of modernisation were considered to catalyse the decline of public religiosity and—as a consequence—the phenomenon of religion as a whole, including urbanisation, social differentiation, mechanisation and rationalisation. However, the 'secularisation hypothesis', as it went on to be referred to in the scholarly community, was soon criticised, for instance for its restricted understanding of religion which foremostly focussed on religion's established and more organised variants (Luckmann 1967). While the theoretical concept of secularisation has meanwhile been debunked by empirical research, it has inspired increased interest in these 'alternative forms' of religiosity. A wide array of new terminology accounts for the changing religious landscape: invisible religion (Luckmann 1967), implicit religion (Thomas 2001) or popular religion (Knoblauch 2007), to name just a few examples that have been introduced to the German-speaking scholarly discourse. The growing public and scholarly interest in handbooks or guides to religions can also be considered a consequence of the debate surrounding secularisation, fuelled by the fact that religious pluralism—and an often very diverse religious landscape that begs for orientation—has become the norm in many European societies. As scholarly research on religious groups in Austria is scarce, *Was Graz glaubt* is a very welcome publication within a small field. The author, Anna Strobl, states that the objective of her study

is to provide a guidebook 'documenting and illustrating Austria's religious diversity' (p. 22), thus evoking high expectations in the reader.

Strobl wrote—and later published (Strobl 1997)—her doctoral thesis in the discipline of Catholic Theology on the situation of Islam in Austria (Strobl 1996). Between 2003 and 2007 she annually taught a course on women in Islam ('Frau im Islam – Leben zwischen Anpassung und Emanzipation') at the Department of Ethics and Social Studies at the University of Graz. Currently she teaches Catholic Religion and Applied Informatics at a Styrian high school.

At the centre of this 'guide to religions' in Austria's second-largest city 72 articles can be found, each describing one religious group, framed by an introduction and concluding remarks. Frequently, long verbatim quotations—from religious spokespeople, interviewees and secondary commentators—are woven into the articles, giving them a journalistic touch. The lists of references at the end of each of the 72 descriptions are not consistent, but instead printed as submitted by each respective community. Occasionally there are orthographical failings (e.g., 'Vischnuismus' instead of 'Vishnuismus', p. 303; 'Santaria' instead of 'Santería'), but also semantic errors (e.g., 'frauendominierende' instead of 'frauendominierte', p. 584) to be found.

While all but eight descriptions were composed by Strobl, they are based on interviews, usually conducted with leading members of each respective community. The final printed versions were reviewed and approved by the communities before going into print, essentially making them self-depictions and leaving the responsibility for the published portrayals with the groups themselves (pp. 24-25). The questionnaire, which is still publicly available on the project's website (http://religionen-in-graz.gmxhome.de/Fragebogen_Religionen%20in%20Graz.pdf), comprises nine very general questions, ranging in scope from basic data (name, contact information) to the history of the group in Graz or Styria and information on the organisational structure both locally and internationally. Surprisingly, some of the more intriguing topics named in the introductory chapter as parts of the interview (e.g., main tenets, religious practice, social engagement, role of women in the community, youth work and relationship to other religious groups) are not reflected in this questionnaire.

As the subtitle of the book suggests, this project tries to shed some light on the phenomena of 'religion and spirituality' in the city of Graz. At the outset Strobl discloses her understanding of religion as being phenomenological, an approach she characterises as 'appreciating the specific individuality of the singular phenomenon' (p. 22). She holds that the phenomenological approach takes the self-perception of religious people or groups

seriously without being judgemental. Furthermore, restraint from 'hastily comparing or functionalising' (p. 23) protects the integrity of the individual phenomenon. The definition of religion or religiosity does not stand at the core of phenomenology as she defines it, rather the understanding and description of religious experience in each respective group. It remains unclear or open to interpretation how this understanding of religion influences her project or affects her theoretical foundation. The term 'spirituality'—contrasted against 'religion', 'religiosity' or 'faith'—is described as a nebulous umbrella term, comprising diverse elements like esotericism, natural healing or Western adaptations of Buddhism (p. 581). Frequently, she notes, the concept of spirituality is rendered in opposition to institutionalised religions or churches.

The introductory chapter of the book gives a brief overview of the religious situation in Graz in numbers based on data generated by the *Bundesanstalt Statistik Österreich* (Federal Agency for Statistics Austria). It also provides a description of the project's general approach and scope and recounts the current legal situation concerning religions in Austria. A theoretical section on 'changing religiosity' mostly summarises the findings of two projects regarding the 'return of religion', conducted at the Department of Practical Theology at the University of Vienna.

Subsequently, a series of brief historical accounts inform about the emergence and situation of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and New Religious Movements in Graz. It warrants mention that Christianity is dealt with in more detail, with separate sections for Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodoxy, Evangelical and Free Churches and finally African Churches. When introducing 'Hinduism in Graz', Strobl erroneously assigns a 'clear Indian background' to the 'Unification Church', Fiat Lux and Universal Life. In doing so, she misquotes one of the few Religious Studies sources she uses in her book (p. 55). This grave error is even more puzzling as she mentions the older designation of Universal Life—'Heimholungswerk Jesu Christi', which clearly indicates the Christian background of the movement—on the next page (p. 56). Furthermore, the article on the Unification Movement also touches on its origins in Korea (p. 551).

A brief section on interreligious dialogue concludes the introductory part. Notably, this section refers exclusively to dialogue among Christian groups.

The descriptive articles in the book are arranged according to the legal status of the groups in Austria, starting with officially recognised religions followed by registered confessional communities and finally religious clubs and associations.

Taking concrete examples, the article on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) commences by giving an interpretation of the name of this religious movement (pp. 133-141). However, the paragraph becomes slightly confusing for readers not familiar with LDS when it first mentions that the attribute 'Latter-day' distinguishes the church from the Apostolic Age church (*Urkirche*), but then concludes that it is (according to its own understanding) in fact a restored Apostolic Age church. The article specifies the Bible and the *Book of Mormon* as central texts of LDS, but fails to name the other half of the officially sanctioned canon (the *Doctrine and Covenants* and the *Pearl of Great Price*). Other than that, this introduction to Mormonism exhibits a tendency to downplay the differences between LDS doctrine and mainstream Christianity. The focus of the article lies on the characterisation of community life, common priesthood and the various charitable initiatives of the church whilst concepts like the temple are omitted. The tone of this self-portrait is naturally highly promotional.

The introduction to the Unification Movement (pp. 551-558) revolves around the topics of family and world peace. The former is discussed in terms of the Unificationist image of family as well as the blessing ceremony, while the latter is given in the context of the many peace-related initiatives that are driven by the Unification Movement. The doctrinal aspects of the description are explained against a biblical backdrop which does not touch upon the Asian philosophical background of the *Divine Principle*. While the public prominence of the 'mass marriages' is alluded to, the preceding—and potentially more controversial—matching process is left unmentioned. It does not come as a surprise that all other controversies—including public and internal disputes—are not mentioned.

These samples were drawn for two reasons. Firstly, LDS is officially recognised while the Unification Movement is only a religious association, with a history of problematic relations with the Austrian government. Secondly, the article about LDS was written by Strobl and was based on her interviews, while the representatives of the Unification Movement decided to rewrite their description from scratch after reviewing Strobl's draft. Yet despite these differences, several parallels can be drawn between the two. First of all, both depictions exhibit a tendency to downplay the differences between their respective doctrines and mainstream Christianity. There are several possible reasons for this that come to mind. This tendency may be a strategy to avoid public conflict and controversy, or to gain new prospective members. While public or internal controversies are generally omitted, we find in both descriptions a focus on the social capital—a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu—the groups accumulate by contributing to society. Examples of these societal contributions include support for and conservation of

traditional family values and the promotion of world peace. It is a result of the study's design that the perspective in these articles is one-sided and that the religious groups present themselves as they prefer to be perceived by the general public. This supposition is already highlighted by Leopold Neuhold, Professor at the Department of Ethics and Social Studies at the University of Graz, in his preface, where he defends Strobl's approach by stating that the outsider's perspective might not always be objective (p. 20). While I suppose that most scholars would agree with this truism, there are several methodological consequences and problematic aspects of the approach chosen in *Was Graz glaubt* which are not reflected upon in the book at all.

The fact that the articles were approved or written by the respective community leaders brings about the problem of conflicting interpretations, for example of history, or problematic formulations and vocabulary. For instance the article on the Bahá'í faith mentions in its historical introduction that the Bábist movement represents 'a radical break with antediluvian Islamic tradition' (p. 265). In accordance with the approach favoured by the author, the responsibility for characterising the tradition as antiquated lies with the Bahá'í community, but in a scholarly context such judgement would not be acceptable. Undue generalisations are another possible consequence, as illustrated by the statement that Buddhism is a non-theistic religion, resulting in a lack of a concept of god (p. 253). While no clear definition of 'theism' is given, I doubt whether the concept is helpful in this context at all, especially given its origins within Christian theology.

Consequently I would argue that the 'lack of absolute objectivity' mentioned by Neuhold affects these self-depictions at least as much as it affects scholarly descriptions. Generally speaking, science offers a wide range of tools and methods to assure certain standards—for instance peer-reviews—that the approach of simply rendering primary descriptions cannot provide.

Another rather obvious problem that becomes clear when looking at the eight articles that were not authored by Strobl herself is the lack of consistency, arrangement and typographical formatting of the content. This makes the descriptions less comparable, less accessible and—as a consequence—less useful. A related issue that especially affects these articles is that it remains unclear whether Strobl revised them at all or whether they were printed directly as submitted.

In the concluding remarks, the author tries to bridge the gap between the results of her study and some theoretical considerations. She claims that her project was able to confirm the trends that sociology of religion has investigated and theorised about in recent years (p. 581), and yet she fails to mention a single proponent of these trends. Briefly summarised, at this point she considers the increased freedom of choice with respect to one's faith, a

tendency towards the less organised forms of religion, the free 'composing' of one's own faith and the rising importance of 'spirituality'. However, it remains entirely unclear how any of these trends are confirmed or refuted by any of the articles in this book, as she never properly connects the two in an analysis.

Most of the links she then goes on to create between the primary materials and her theoretical considerations remain vague to say the least, and only a few concrete examples are provided. This lack of evidence to back the claims made in this concluding chapter could also be seen as a result of the topics not being reflected in her questionnaire, as was mentioned above.

When she notes that 'almost all' religious groups have problems with young people losing interest in religious matters, the reader is left wondering which religious groups are *not* affected by this issue (p. 584). On other subjects, such as experiencing the social status quo as unjust or general openness towards other religious groups, the reader is left entirely in the dark about which groups Strobl is referring to.

When she recounts that 'many' communities she interviewed consider the family to be a central value and that they regret its devaluation and demise in modern societies, she assigns these statements to Roman Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical and Muslim communities. First of all, this assignment is not only very unspecific but is in fact incomplete, as the reader is left uninformed about other religious groups that are highly appreciative of the family in their doctrine, like the aforementioned LDS or the Unification Movement. Secondly, it would have been interesting to see a more nuanced rendering of this discourse. How do those religious groups which consider our society to be insufficiently supportive of the traditional concept of family differ from those that do not agree or even care? Concurrently, which groups are less or not at all concerned about family values? Are there any indicators confirming the mentioned presupposition that traditional family values are actually in decline in modern societies?

The reader can hardly be surprised by the proposition that people who prefer to only adopt elements of a religion are especially attracted to groups bearing little or no conditions for membership. However, Strobl fails to support this seemingly self-evident truism with a single example from her study or by quoting a secondary reference. Furthermore, the reader does not learn anything about these 'religious composers' other than that they like to 'consume' religion and that they adhere to the motto in which the path equals the goal (p. 583).

One of the few direct evaluations of her study that she presents in this chapter concerns the clear numeric male dominance in leading positions and thus also among her interview partners. In this context, she also notes the

disparity between 'most' groups' official position of granting women and men equal status, but the reader is left wondering who is referred to exactly and why this topic is not explored a little further. It would have been interesting to know more about the groups that have female leadership or about the differences between them. Even without disclosing the names of the communities, knowing more about their religious tradition or their legal status might have produced intriguing subjects for further exploration.

The historical overview Strobl presents in her introduction (pp. 35-59) indicates that she subscribes to the obsolete concept of the 'five world religions', distinguishing them from New Religious Movements. Even though this distinction is somewhat dated, it would have been more beneficial to follow through and use it in the analytical and conclusive part, thus connecting it with the introduction. As it is, the concluding remarks mostly remain an isolated collection of interesting yet underexposed topics.

Was Graz glaubt collects self-depictions of many—or even most—religious groups currently found in Austria's second biggest city and thereby provides an overview, albeit only from the insider's perspective. One of the merits of the project is to be found in its egalitarian approach in terms of which groups could present themselves. Unfortunately, this principle of equality is undermined by the reproduction of the (arbitrary) threefold hierarchy introduced by the state and the law in the arrangement of the articles. Alternatively, the articles could have been ordered solely alphabetically, which would have furthered the author's stated aim to provide a neutral guidebook.

The study can also be viewed as a direct contribution to interreligious dialogue and understanding in Graz. This interpretation is also suggested on the last few pages of the concluding remarks, where Strobl gathers suggestions of how religious groups could contribute to the welfare of the city and society as a whole, but also how they could better get along with each other.

From a Religious Studies viewpoint, this book does not meet scholarly standards in many ways. In its analytical parts, it is characterised by an inflationary use of indefinite numerals ('most', 'many', 'few' et cetera) where one would expect numbers, facts or at least references. The secondary literature drawn upon to underpin the theoretical core of the book is extremely limited, especially when taking into account the vast amount of publications on the topics of religious change in the 20th century, new religious movements, religious pluralism and so forth that are readily available. Not only does Strobl restrict herself to German references, she seems largely committed to a small circle of Austrian authors of theological provenance. Furthermore, she frequently quotes personal interviews and—sometimes even unpublished—master theses as authoritative sources. Pas-

sages that could have easily been supported by secondary literature, such as the etymology and brief historical background of the term 'sect' (p. 56), are quoted verbatim from personal interviews.

Almost disparagingly, she notes that this book does not contain 'second hand' descriptions, but instead provides a platform for religious groups to present themselves (p. 22). While Strobl mentions some advantages of this approach, she remains silent with respect to its methodological consequences and shortcomings.

At the end of the day, *Was Graz glaubt* is itself a product of the 'market of religions', which it describes in the superficial theoretical considerations that go along with the religious self-portrayals. Strobl considers the provision of contact information to be a 'special service' of the book, enabling the interested reader to get in touch with the religious group of his or her preference quickly and easily (p. 22). As a guidebook for religions, it caters to those who are on the lookout for religious services, the spiritual seekers or wanderers, the religious composers who eclectically create their own faith (p. 581). In fact, it seems difficult to argue what—apart from the uniform style that at least many of the chapters follow—essentially distinguishes the descriptions assembled from the informational material most of the introduced groups already provide.

The exclusively primary literature presented at the end of each article does not even follow a uniform citation style. Strobl excuses this circumstance by stating that the references were provided by each respective group, illustrating the lack of scholarly rigour that characterises the approach of this project. The absence of any secondary literature on the religions discussed is rather disappointing. One could argue—although Strobl refrains from doing so—that the decision to use self-descriptions was a pragmatic one. After all, the project was conducted by a single person over only 20 months. Even so, bibliographies would have taken very little work to compile, since using at least some secondary literature to review the content of the self-portraits is necessary anyway.

In that the communities were responsible for their own descriptions, Strobl's own writing only directly accounts for about 50 of the nearly 600 pages of the book. This leaves little space for her to create a decent theoretical framework in which to meaningfully embed the numerous accounts. Hence, for the most part, I would consider the book primary literature and as such an object of Religious Studies research.

In his preface to *Was Graz glaubt*, Leopold Neuhold holds that this study's great achievement is to be found in its 'small contribution to the understanding of the changing religious landscape' (p. 20). As far as the

size of the contribution to this discourse goes, the author of this review agrees.

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