1 Introduction

Religion places our lives within a larger frame of interpretation. It relates life to a higher, transcendent order. It gives life a deeper meaning and a sense of the unconditional. Religion makes it possible to remain capable of action even when events occur in which no more meaning can be found, and when challenging transitions and crises have to be overcome.

If religion is understood as an interpretation of life, then religion belongs to the sociality of humans (Luckmann 2014; Hoult 1967). However, in the cultural context of Germany and Europe, which are the primary focus of this chapter, this understanding of religion seems to have lost its persuasive power. Many speak of an inexorably advancing secularization (Pollack 2012). They refer here above all to the continuing loss of members of the churches and a forgetting of the Christian message of God (Taylor 2007), which they interpret as lack of interest in lived religion in general.

This chapter presents arguments that prove the cultural presence of lived religion as an interpretation of life, even in supposedly secularized Europe. The change in values in modern Western societies has a strong impact on religious behaviour. Lived religion has become individualized and pluralized. However, just as it is a place for the communication of a religious interpretation of life, the church remains socially relevant. Participation in the church’s life rituals (Kasualien) is also changing significantly. Nevertheless, the church continues to be a cultural site of symbolic and ritual interpretations of life.

2 Transformation of Values

Many sociologists agree that since the 1970s values have significantly changed, both in Germany and in Western societies in general (Klages 1985; Inglehart 1989, 1997; Reckwitz 2017). There was a massively increased emphasis on the importance of values such as freedom, autonomy, equality and humanity. This shows a clear devaluation of the values associated with tradition and convention, loyalty, deference, and conformity.

The new values of autonomy and self-development are far more open to a wide range of definitions than the earlier values of convention and tradition were. They refer to each individual’s own subjectivity and require continuous self-examination and discursive negotiation. Ultimately, others do not have the right to decide which life path, which partnership, which friends are the right ones for me, or to whom I want to commit myself for how long, and where I want to be involved and
how intensively. The self-confidence that something is right and appropriate for me becomes an important criterion for the relationship to my life partners or friends, and decisions about the course of education, profession or search for job offers.

Since the 1970s lived religion has also been drawn into the wake of this claim to autonomy. Religion is no longer just what is objectively referred to as ‘religion’ or ‘church’. Religion is now also what the individual understands by the notion, so that the reference that the individual makes to what he or she understands by religion and communicates as religion is also part of the concept of religion. ‘Religion’ has become synonymous with interpretations of life related to one’s own subjectivity (Gräb 2006a, 46–55).

‘Religion’ – the term used in the singular – means a human capacity that should be understood as a dimension of human life evoking the questions of where we come from and where we are going, and what makes our lives meaningful in a greater context. This religious attitude to life we can perform or ignore, but there is no doubt that it is part of us as self-conscious human beings. In order to distinguish ‘religion’ in the singular, understood as a human capacity and as a human attitude to the transcendent wholeness of reality, from the institutionalized ‘religions’ in the plural, the concept of spirituality has been pervasive in the religious field and in the studies of religion as well. The term ‘spirituality’ is increasingly used to describe religion as a form of life interpretation not only open to the transcendent wholeness of reality, but also realizing expressions of a deep feeling of connectedness with that dimension grounding one’s own existence and fulfilling it with a deeper sense of meaning (Gräb 2008; Knoblauch 2007). Nevertheless, although spiritual attitude knows itself to be free in its relation to the ideas and practices of different religions and of the church, we would be misguided not to recognize that in modern societies, the behaviour of the majority of church members in their religious practices also more or less actualizes the concept of spirituality. They practice their relationship to the church not in accordance with traditional churchly norms, but rather in terms of whether they feel moved themselves by its spiritual dimensions.

The spiritual interest in specific occasions during the course of life, marked by the stages of a normal biography, determines their relationship to the church for the majority of church members. Most church members come to the church for baptisms and confirmations, weddings, and funerals, at school enrolment celebrations, at Christmas and other church holidays, as long as they also have a cultural significance for society. What moves these members to take part in these church rituals? If we are to get a deeper theological understanding of this, we have to see it is the integration of fragmented identity and an acknowledgment of the individual searching within a broader context for the interpretation that the Christian story of salvation is offering (Weyel 2008).
3 Transformation of Values and Lived Religion

As we know from church membership studies (Bedford-Strohm and Jung 2015), despite individualization and secularization church membership in Germany is still largely based on convention and tradition. People come to the church especially at the transitional stages in the life and annual cycle. Then they demand symbols and rituals that place the life of the individual within the frame of the Christian story and thereby in a larger wholeness of reality embracing the physical and metaphysical context, promising God’s blessing, protection, and guidance.

One can certainly say that what holds most people in church is their interest in life rituals with which the church stages symbols of the Christian interpretation of life in an aesthetically appealing and personally engaging way. Even if people are in the church predominantly because of tradition and convention, their behaviour as church members engages spiritual interest that seeks an integration of personal identity into a broader horizon of meaning represented by religious symbols and rituals. Nobody forces people to stay in church; if they do so, it is because they do not want to lose the Christian-religious framework of a worldview, life interpretation and production of meaning that for them belongs to the cultural setting of their way of life.

Insofar as the church itself can do something to be or remain attractive for its members and those who might become members, it must therefore start with an acknowledgement of the potential of the rituals of life for a spiritually meaningful interpretation of life. Those who attend church do so ultimately based on their life-oriented spiritual interests. However, the dissolution of church membership must not be understood as an act of spiritual lack of interest. Most often, before leaving the church, people take stock. A cost-benefit calculation is made. What is my personal benefit of staying in the church? Is the effort, including the financial effort, justified? Obviously, their spiritual interests remain active, but the church may no longer be the place where people search for satisfaction of their spiritual needs.

The transformation of values in modern culture is also becoming increasingly prevalent in religious relations. Instead of orienting oneself in terms of tradition and convention, people follow their own spiritual aspirations much more. Correspondingly, those who are responsible for church leadership now see their responsibility for reflecting on the spiritual needs of the people. What makes the church important for the people is that it helps them to enlarge their capacities for coping with life’s crises and the disruptive experiences of contingencies by opening the transcendent dimension of reality and witnessing God’s faithful presence. The service of the church is called upon when previous orientations become fragile or are lost and existential questions of meaning arise.

On the one hand, religion lived in this way is highly individualized, partly under the roof of the large, institutionalized church, and on the other hand, it is free-floating, producing hybrid forms. The formerly binding forces of religious communities
have become rather fluid energies. Thus, new religious energy centres are constantly forming from which high levels of spiritual, social and/or cultural attractiveness emanates, but mostly only for a limited time, bound to special places and special, charismatic personalities. These are global trends, but in Europe, too, free churches may reach higher numbers locally and temporarily, but seldom for a longer period of time and hardly ever on a broad scale.

In view of the declining number of church members and the loosened form of membership by the majority of church members in Germany and the broader European context, it is sometimes also argued that the future could belong to fundamentalist and charismatic forms of religion, because they offer a clear and strong sense of commitment and orientation (Riesebrodt [2000] 2001; Graf 2014; Graf and Hartmann 2018). It is true that the churches, which are growing dynamically in the case in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and East Asia, for example, give the impression that they can convince their followers by a strong message of faith and can discipline them by imposing rigid norms of behaviour. However, their success is largely also based on helping individuals to gain an identity that makes them feel better and able to cope with the challenges of life. The binding forces that these churches release do not result primarily from normative demands and commitments, but from the promise that new forms of life empowerment arise from the energy of faith (Berger 2010; Cox 1995).

The success of the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in the global South is essentially based on their ability to respond to spiritual, social, and economic needs. However, the aim is not to silence people with their message, but to release the self-activation of people through the aesthetic, emotionally moving staging of their symbols and rituals. In the foreground are not doctrine and dogma, nor church-institutional claims to obligations and normative concepts, but a decisive focus on what people need and what they can do to be fulfilled with the Holy Spirit in spiritual, social, and economic terms. These churches offer people the chance to thrive in precarious situations and contexts as people possessed of their own dignity and their enormous capacity for action (Öhlmann, Gräb, and Frost 2020).

What is different in the global South? There the churches stand for a particular way of life. They accompany people not only over the course of their lives; they convey a spiritual interpretation of life, a concept of meaning and a set of values in the light of the Christian faith. In largely unstable social, economic, and political conditions, the churches and religions play an important role to promote the sustainable development of society as a whole (Öhlmann, Frost, and Gräb 2016).

In enormously functionally differentiated Western societies religion fulfils its specific function as vigorously as possible. Religion deals with the questions we humans face when we are confronted with the limits of our human capacities and contingencies that we cannot transform into meaningful actions (Luhmann and Kieserling 2007). Religion arises in the awareness of our finiteness, of sin and guilt, and today above all in the light of the doubt about the meaning of the whole. Religion
deals with the question of how life can reach its fullness and be experienced as a potential of human flourishing despite finiteness, sin, and guilt (Gräb 2006b).

The themes of religion are the themes of a religious interpretation of life that reaches down to the depths of reality. They are the themes that we encounter in the Christian story of the triune God: The Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer. The experience of finiteness corresponds to faith in God the Creator. The fate of sin and guilt is overcome by the orientation towards the reconciling work of Christ. Doubt about the meaning of the whole is countered by trust in the encouraging and renewing power of the Holy Spirit.

The church is expected to work on a sustainable interpretation of life even in crises and at the turning points of life. At the same time, however, these questions also arise for people in their everyday lives. Responses to these questions are negotiated in the networks of the lifeworld, yet any reference to the Christian story is usually not explicitly established. However, it would again be wrong to come to the conclusion that, as a result of the increasing disappearance of the traditional language of the Christian faith in terms narrating the Christian story, the desire for and work on the topics of a spiritual interpretation of life would also have been lost.

4 ‘Lived Religion’ and Church Relationship

Practical Theology in the German-speaking world has long been engaged in a heated debate about whether the decline in the number of church members, the weak participation in Sunday services, the loss of social relevance of the churches is leading to a gradual disappearance of religion (Wegner 2015; Pollack and Wegner 2017). Some Practical Theologians affirm this, now also in the evaluation of the last Church Membership Survey of the “Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland” (EKD) (Bedford-Strohm and Jung 2015), although they no longer speak of religious “indifference” in the title, as the provisional publication does (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 2014). Nevertheless, it continues to use this terminology in a central place. Gert Pickel and Tabea Spieß confirm the non-denominational “religious indifference” which they see as equivalent to “lack of religion” (Pickel and Spieß 2015, 263). Maintaining a distance from the church is equated with a lack of interest in religion and ultimately with lack of religion per se. They do not ask how people respond to the experiences of life that demand the encouragement of meaning making by religious interpretation. Religiousness is most often measured in terms of the knowledge of and agreement with elements of the doctrines and creeds of the Church, but not by the way people behave towards themselves and their lives in terms of self-interpretation open to a transcendent dimension of reality (Pollack 1995, 186).

In an empirical research design that looks to religion as separate from the act of communication, people cannot be understood as possible subjects of their own religious self-understanding. However, what people understand as religion or as their
relationship to religion must be discerned according to what they perceive as religiously or spiritually relevant life issues (Nassehi 2009).

## 5 Lived Religion as Free-Floating Network Communication

The last Church Membership Survey of the EKD (Bedford-Strohm and Jung 2015) adopted a different approach to empirical research on religion and the church. A research team led by Birgit Weyel (Weyel 2015, 339–43) wanted to ascertain in what kinds of social relationships church members address religious issues. The research team initiated a network survey to find out with whom, when and where people talk about religious issues (Weyel, Hermelink and Grubauer 2015, 435–37).

The analysis of this network survey revealed that church members occasionally bring up religious topics, but not so often. They do so mainly in the family, in their circle of friends and at work. Religion becomes a topic of conversation where people can rely on a personal relationship of trust, precisely because it is always a matter of personal questions of life interpretation. That religion is a question of life interpretation also explains why this question is not raised so often in closer contacts. For explicit forms of interpretation, one needs an appropriate vocabulary, which is not so easy to establish. The language used in the church is most often too far removed from the expression of one’s own experiences and thoughts. Therefore, researchers must reflect on the fact that the marginal number of occasions for religious communication in everyday life mirrors the fact that people are not trained to articulate religious experiences, feelings, thoughts and attitudes. Nevertheless, the central question of life which seems open for a religious interpretation is the “question about the meaning of life” (Stegbauer, Grubauer, and Weyel 2015, 414).

This network study regarded church members not only as consumers of the activities of the church, but as religious agents following their own agenda of communicating their personal affairs and also their spiritual interests whenever it seems necessary for them. This marks a new approach in empirical religious studies that offers significant starting points for looking at the occurrence of religious communication beyond the practices of a church relationship (Weyel, Gräb, and Heimbrock 2013).

This explains too why church members do indeed seek contact with the church and the congregation, especially with the pastor, in the context of rituals anchored in life cycles. Apart from its occurrence in everyday life, religious communication takes place in the intimate social relationships of partnership, marriage, family, and circles of friends, but at major turning points, the need for a religious interpretation of life calls for an ecclesiastical elucidation. Then the liturgy of the church is called for, which with its symbols of creation and justification, reconciliation, and redemption,
involving the individuals in an interpretative framework that at the same time collectively unites Christianity.

Church and congregations are for church members – this can be stated as a conclusion of the network survey. Church and community will then find access to members (and, I think, far beyond that) when they make an effort to be there to meet the needs.

6 Life Interpretation as Identity- and Self-Formation

There is no reason to assume a growing lack of interest in religion – even in the so-called ‘secularized’ Western societies. One need not even speak of increasing religious indifference, despite the increasing number of those who do not belong to any church or religious community. On the contrary, if one’s basic premise is in people’s life interests then a social need for religious communication becomes apparent, but this need is one that derives from the existential questions of life.

As far as the church is concerned, this means that the church should recognize people as sovereign subjects not only of their lives but also of the interpretation of their lives. The church must accept that people are also self-determined in matters of religious or spiritual life. This by no means makes the church’s proclamations superfluous, but people want to be able to relate the church’s message constructively to the questions of life that arise for them personally.

This is impressively demonstrated by a study by the Institute for the Study of Religions in Bayreuth, which was headed by Christoph Bochinger (Bochinger, Engelbrecht, and Gebhardt 2009). This empirical religious study focused on a new, highly individualized generation of ‘believers’. Many people more or less tacitly alluded to the binding claims of the churches and the orthodox demands of theology. They wanted to fulfil their religious needs in an individual way and under their own direction. In doing so, they were convinced of their own competence in religious interpretation. However, this new generation of ‘believers’ was characterized not only by their sovereign handling of church traditions, teachings and truth claims; they also aimed to test the wide range of spiritual teachings and techniques that are now available in global culture and to examine their suitability for meeting their personal needs. In doing so, novel constellations are created in which Christian and non-Christian ideas and practices are combined, even if they appear incompatible from the perspective of theology and the church.

The Bayreuth study hypothesises that within the Christian churches, and even more so on their periphery and far beyond, new religious patterns of interpretation of life are developing which subtly transform established Christianity and especially its ecclesiastical expressions. It is not religious indifference which is the consequence of a weakening of the church binding forces and the much-lamented breaking off traditions. On the contrary, with the decline of the bonding forces of the church, other powers of religious interpretation have emerged, but above all individ-
uals see themselves increasingly induced, as well as entitled, to behave in religiously self-determined ways. In addition, this fact can be taken up for the theoretically founded and here represented thesis that it is short-sighted to see lived religion solely as a product of socialization. Lived Religion is rather to be understood as a humane act of interpretation of life into which people are repeatedly pushed, one way or another, to explain the experiences of their lives. That is because as human beings they have to lead their lives in a self-conscious way. People cannot avoid the question of what the whole of their own existence in this world is all about – even if there are many, many ways of keeping this question in the background of consciousness.

We see that contemporary religious diagnosis that investigates increasing religious indifference suffers from an inability to distinguish between objective and subjective religion. Undoubtedly, the traditional forms of religious practice have become fragile. They have lost their closeness to people and their everyday lives. Theology and the church can take up this interest by rendering visible the symbols of the Christian faith (creation, sin, reconciliation, redemption) as means of life interpretation. However, if these symbols are to acquire an understandable and convincing meaning for people, they must be recognizable as a form of a deeper self-interpretation.

One does not learn much about the religion lived in everyday life if one looks only at whether people agree with the church’s creeds or follow other doctrines and practices of faith (e.g., Zen meditation, anthroposophy, astrology, reincarnation, etc.). It is important to draw people into a conversation about what is convincing to them by addressing what gives meaning to their lives, when they can no longer find such meaning for themselves. What is your trust in life ultimately based on? What gives stability in life when all certainties are shattered? These are the decisive religious questions of life because they cannot be answered without taking recourse to a transcendent dimension or to the divine, representing the incomprehensible wholeness of meaning. The discursive fact that people themselves raise the question of meaning, or relate to it in any way, is already a religious process. Conscious of the fragility and vulnerability of finite existence, people express their longing for the infinite fullness of life.

7 Church Life Rituals and Religious Life Interpretation

The binding force of life rituals offered by the church is not strong enough to prevent the loss of members. Nevertheless, the vast majority of church members still seek contact with the church and participate in its worship services when life rituals are performed, or services are celebrated at turning points in the life cycle or in the religious calendar.
The behaviour of church members shows that transitions and crises in life still call for Christian interpretation. Understood more deeply, theologically speaking, this means that, where the finiteness of life, the incomprehensible gift of life, its needs and its happiness become conscious, or where we have to deal with illness and pressure, dying and death, the compelling need for interpretation, accompaniment and ritualistic treatment arises.

The church life rituals (Kasualien) are attached to the passages and transitions in the life course (Gräb 2006a; Albrecht 2006; Fechtner 2011). These are essentially baptism, confirmation, marriage, and funerals. Baptism is also the sacrament of formal entry into the Christian Church, but at the same time, it celebrates the gift of life. Confirmation is the personal reception of the baptismal confession, but also the celebration of the transition to adulthood. The ecclesiastical wedding is a service linked to the marriage contracted at the registry office, but also the religious ceremony for the celebration of life and love. Burial is the ritual for coping with death, but also a service in which the life of the deceased is located in the light of the Gospel and to which Christian message of hope is directed.

What happens in these services is a religious or theological interpretation of life that works with the symbols of the Christian faith (creation and sin, justification and reconciliation, resurrection, and redemption). This interpretation is carried out in such a way that those who celebrate the service and find their way into their own self-understanding can appropriate it. In this way, the services relate to critical transitions in life to shape the attitudes and ideas towards life.

8 Modern Culture and the Transformation of Religious Communication

Church communication is strongly affected by the change in values described at the beginning of this chapter. Individualization always results in a pluralization of life-oriented attitudes. Traditions and conventions lose their normative power. Instead, they can and must be purposefully selected. Individual decision-making plays a greater role than social induction. Also, as far as church weddings, baptisms, confirmation, and church funerals are concerned, they are no longer chosen only because it is so usual, but because one consciously acknowledges oneself as a member of the church or wants to become one, and also because one wants to pass on Christian values and attitudes to the next generation. However, these are decisions that are made largely in the awareness of having alternatives. Everyone recognizes that he or she can also refrain from participation in these rituals without having to face socially disadvantageous consequences. In some places the non-church alternatives also appear more attractive: the festive ambience of the civil wedding, the seemingly plausible value orientation of the post-socialist youth celebrations, the personal ad-
dress of the secular funeral orator who appreciates the life of the deceased, the selec-
tion of one’s own music, and aesthetic staging.

As social conditions become more complex, there is clearly a need to create fixed
markers for the individual life story by ritually celebrating life’s turning points. What
is always sought is the opportunity to place one’s own individual life into a larger
context of interpretation that is connected to what is generally valid. It is about
the reassurance of personal identity and the experience of social recognition.
Thus, children’s milestones are celebrated within a larger framework, the round-num-
ber birthdays and silver marriage anniversaries. Everywhere the church with its offers
of rituals and thus also with the symbolization of the Christian interpretation of life,
finds itself in a market where a variety of interpretations of life, conceptions of life-
styless, formations of values and worldviews are offered.

The considerations of the ethnologist Victor Turner regarding the transformative
value of rites of passage in modern Western societies are enlightening in any reflec-
tion on the changes in church ritual practice and thus the socio-cultural mediation of
the Christian-religious interpretation of life under the conditions of modern culture

In contrast to simple, agrarian societies, on the basis of which Arnold van Gen-
nep (1909) developed his theory of Les rites de passage (van Gennep, Vizedom, and
Caffee 2019), Turner asks how these rites come to operate under the conditions of
functionally differentiated and religiously individualized and pluralized societies.
He notes that they lose their unconditional obligatory character. It is no longer nec-
essary for members of society to commit and submit to them. They now assume a
pluralistic, fragmentary, and experimental character. They also lose their collective
commitment. They no longer have the same intellectual and emotional significance
for all members of society.

The traditional rites of passage organized by churches and religious movements
are facing competition. Rites are formed that fulfil a similar social function as the
traditional rites of passage do. Turner calls them ‘liminoid’ phenomena (Turner
2008, 53–55), because they merely resemble the ritualization of the liminal, the
threshold transitions. He identifies these ‘liminoid’ phenomena in the fields of art
and sport, games and entertainment, leisure, and vacation. According to Turner,
these areas of art and culture, leisure time and sport fulfil a function in modern West-
ern societies that is comparable to that of rites of passage in traditional, agrarian so-
cieties.

Film and literature, theatre and football, hobbies and holidays also interrupt the
everyday, formed by work and professional practice, by fixed roles and functions.
They can – much like the traditional rites of passage based on the life cycle – create
the temporary – but during this period – real transition into a transcendent symbolic
order that attributes a new meaning to the whole.

These ‘liminoid’ rituals of cultural and leisure activities enable threshold expe-
riences. They lead into transitions. They represent passages that temporarily push
members of society beyond the status and functions they occupy and perform in so-
ciety. As a phased interruption of the everyday world, they enable the construction of an imaginative, but at the same time real, experience of an “anti-structure”. Those who are otherwise only interested in, for example, their economic, political, family, professional functions can potentially experience a transcendence of the structure framing their life attitudes and life interpretations. ‘Liminoid’ rituals still have the power to initiate what Turner calls – following the sociologist Mihály Csikszentmihalyi – a “flow-experience” (Turner 2008, 56).

Turner points out that a strong tendency towards the phenomenon of the ‘liminoid’ can also be observed in church ritual practice (Turner 2008, 55). Church life rituals increasingly come to resemble the liminal rites of passage in traditional societies. In modern culture, the experience of the interruption of everyday reality can be encountered in many ways; people can immerse themselves in worlds of meaning that motivate them to cultivate their own attitudes towards life and their own ideas about the significance of life.

The attractiveness of the church’s life rituals draws attention to the fact that what the church offers to people and what they expect from the church are particularly well matched. The church’s rituals of life resonate far beyond the circle of committed parishioners and faithful churchgoers. The theologically deeper reason for the resonance of church life rituals lies in the fact that the church generates an elementary existential interest in a certainty of life that is fed by the interpretive potential of the Christian faith.

On all occasions of worship and preaching, those who are responsible for shaping the church service know that they have to raise the questions, what is the case here and now in people’s lives? What can be said about that in the light of the Christian faith? What does faith give us to enable us to understand our lives?

**Bibliography**


