

# Is Religion More than a Hobby? Social Media Debates on Germany's Religious- Political Order during COVID

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## Abstract

This study uses social media comments on news reports about the exemption of religious communities in Germany from COVID-19 restrictions as empirical data for researching a contemporary, everyday understanding of religion as suggested by Michael Bergunder (2014). To analyse the discourse on religion, a qualitative content analysis is applied, which pre-structures the corpus. This allows for diverse attitudes towards policies on religion, as well as their correlations to understandings of religion to be identified. The results show that the contested role of religion in society and its relationship to the state is linked to the struggle over the filling of the concept of religion. Finally, a critical assessment following Bergunder's approach is applied, emphasizing the need to research the current understanding of religion as a contested concept.

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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted already existing grievances in society. It has not created entirely new conflicts, inequalities, or crises, but has made existing problems visible and more acute. The pandemic also surfaced social order and social values as subjects to be discussed in fundamental terms (Miller/Ludwig/Voss 2020). In this pandemic period, each type of social activity was scrutinized. How essential was it to be able to go to the gym, attend a concert, eat at a restaurant, etc., given the risk of spreading the virus among the population? This question was applied to attending church services and other gatherings for religious worship.


This research examines the debate that arose in response to allowing in-person religious gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. The study implements Michael Bergunder's suggestion to take the contemporary, everyday understanding of religion as the explicit subject matter in the study of religion (2014). In order to research this understanding of religion, the study applies approaches from poststructuralist discourse theory.

To analyse the contemporary, everyday understanding of religion, social media comments on news stories about religion are taken as empirical natural data on the discourse on religion. Qualitative content analysis is used to pre-structure the corpus; this analysis is embedded in a discourse analysis to trace the construction of religion.

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The news of the political decision to allow religious gatherings during the pandemic was initially met with overwhelming disapproval and negative attitudes toward religion. These negative comments are also countered with replies in support of religion and religious practice. By focusing on the discourse around religion during the pandemic, we can identify specific (re)productions of religion; this allows us to find correlations between the latter and attitudes on religion and the religious-political order.

The analysis and its results lead to a critical reflection on this attempt to implement Bergunder's approach. This study shows that there is in fact no public consensus on what constitutes a contemporary, everyday understanding of religion. The paper also highlights the importance of researching the current understanding of religion. Bergunder's remark, that historical research does not necessarily mean it is related to the past, is taken seriously in this study. If one has insights into the current understanding of religion, these can be taken as the foundation to trace its genesis. This will be briefly exemplified.

## 2. Researching Religion 2

This study implements Michael Bergunder's approach to research in the study of religion as laid out in his 2014 article "What is Religion? The Unexplained Subject Matter of Religious Studies." Trying to tackle the discipline's issue of defining religion, Bergunder concluded that all approaches dealing with research on religion are based on the same subject matter, which is a contemporary, everyday understanding of religion that remains largely unexplained, but is still capable of consensus. He names this "Religion 2" (Bergunder 2014: 252; 255). He asserts that if one tries to come up with an explicit definition of religion—which would be called "Religion 1"—it remains bound to Religion 2 to be plausible. Also, approaches that deny that an explicit definition is necessary and even those that reject the concept of religion completely remain attached to Religion 2. Therefore, the logical step is to make this unexplained Religion 2 the explicit subject matter of religious studies (Bergunder 2014: 255).

Bergunder also suggests how to conceptualize this unexplained religion so it can be properly researched. He refers to Ernesto Laclau's and Chantal Mouffe's concept of the "empty signifier" and understands religion as such. Along with Jacques Derrida, Laclau and Mouffe reject any external determination of the discourse that could complete it. While the fixing of meaning is still necessary and not arbitrary, limits of the discourse are always temporary and contingent (Bergunder 2014: 260–263). An empty signifier can temporarily set different elements equivalent and hold them together as a unity by demarcating them against other signifiers (Bergunder 2014: 262–263; Laclau 2007: 30). The signifier can be filled with multiple, even contradictory meanings and it is exactly this inclusion and exclusion of elements that need to be studied to understand the discursive constitution of religion.

To explain how a signifier like religion can seem objectively given, and how its contingency can be concealed, Bergunder finds Judith Butler's concept of performativity helpful. The repetition of certain closures of discourse leads to a sedimentation, so that alternatives are no longer

conceivable. This also enables the materialization of social reality, that is, the notion of a real outside that the signifier refers to. At the same time, however, this process also allows for subversion since no final closure can take place. Therefore, meaning and identity remain unstable (Bergunder 2014: 267–269; Butler 1997: 311).

If one understands religion according to this conceptualization, researching religion must mean retracing its particular repetitions. This can be achieved by genealogy as developed by Michel Foucault. Genealogy rejects the search for an origin or the attempt to find the essence of things (Bergunder 2014: 269; Foucault 1977b: 142–144). Instead, the approach allows for a “naming history,” which is what Bergunder demands from religious studies research. The entry point of such research is the contemporary, everyday understanding of religion whose concrete articulations can be traced back to and examined in their own context (Bergunder 2014: 270). Following this approach, the present study takes a certain discourse and traces the specific articulations of a contemporary, everyday understanding of religion.

### 3. Policies and laws on religion

To understand the ongoing political controversy surrounding religion in Germany, as well as the political decision to exempt religious communities from COVID-19 restrictions and the consequent public reaction, a brief summary of German policy and legislation on religion needs to be given.

The relationship between the state and religion in Germany is an amalgam of models used in other countries. Germany thus has similarities to a pluralist model but also characteristics of a state church (Willems 2001: 138). This specific organizational form is called the “cooperation model” or “hinkende Trennung” (a “limping separation”). Formally and legally, the state and religious communities are separate, although they share certain responsibilities and resources (Großbölting 2018: 74). This policy is rooted in a specific historical context and its implementation creates a “religious-Christian-mainline-churches privilege,” leading to discrimination against religious minorities and non-religious members of society (Willems 2018: 52).<sup>1</sup>

This means, for example, that representatives of the churches are on government ethics boards, that social services run by religious communities are equal to state-run ones, and denominational religious education is a subject at state-run schools, which is however very restricted for non-Christian religious communities. There is also a church tax in Germany, which churches can collect through state tax authorities (Großbölting 2018: 87–88).

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<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of German Christians are members of the Catholic Church or the Evangelical Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, EKD). These institutions are more established than so-called free churches (Freikirchen) and cooperate more closely with the state.

## 4. COVID-19 restrictions for religious communities

A new political challenge in the field of religion arose in March 2020 with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The state and federated states (Bundesländer) had to make lockdown rules in accordance with the aforementioned policies and laws on religion.<sup>2</sup> The initial COVID-19 lockdown measures published by the state on the 16th of March prohibited gatherings of religious communities (Bundesregierung 2020a). While the Federal Constitutional Court (Bundesverfassungsgericht) initially agreed with this decision (Janisch 2020), at the end of April 2020, when it became clear that long-term regulations had to be established, the court overruled the prohibition of religious gatherings (LTO-Redaktion 2020). Religious freedom, including public religious practice, is well protected in Germany. As a consequence, in-person religious gatherings were only prohibited for a very short period whereas other social activity, like eating out in restaurants and attending sports events, continued to be restricted. Another special treatment was that religious institutions were allowed to come up with and adhere to their own regulations. That said, these had to broadly follow the government's guidelines (see for example in North-Rhine Westphalia the Coronaschutzverordnung (CoronaSchVO) (Corona Protection Ordinance), as amended 30 October 2020, § 1, para. 3).

The exemption of religious communities from COVID-19 regulations is a good example of the special relationship between the state and religion in Germany. As soon as the federal government realized that longer term solutions had to be found, they organized a meeting with representatives of the so-called “big” religious communities—Christians, Jews, and Muslims—to work together on regulations for religious gatherings. The resolution the government published as a result highlights the cooperative relationship and the extent to which the religious communities are appreciated as partners of the state (Bundesregierung 2020c).

## 5. Data: Social media comments

Public communication on social media can provide valuable insight into society's attitudes and opinions, in this case toward religion. Due to their fast global spread:

“ Social media have become a major part of the fabric of contemporary human society. [...] Social media today thus comprise a complex social system that reflects and reveals human society and is also, itself, a unique social phenomenon. (Kozinets 2020: 4–5)

A major industry and important information platform, social media provides more than just services for friendly human interaction. Politicians and public institutions use social media to communicate with the public. Meanwhile news outlets rely on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and others. News items that are published on social media differ to those in print publications or broadcast programmes as they offer readers and viewers the ability to instantly

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<sup>2</sup> Germany being a federal state, COVID-19 regulations, as well as decisions about religion are the explicit responsibility of the individual federated states.

react and participate in discussions. This has been a major change in journalism as recipients can now participate in the production of news. Individual contributions and those of news services stand side by side (Maier 2016: 65; 74).

Social media comments are therefore an important source for research as they contribute to the knowledge production of society on the one hand and are publicly visible expressions of personal opinions on the other. However, social media communication presents certain challenges too. First, social media profiles cannot necessarily be tied to individuals' identities, which is why "the comments themselves rather than the individuals serve as the unit of analysis for this study" (Keller/Honea/Ollivant 2021: 6). Further, social media data is also not necessarily representative of general public opinion. For one, not every demographic group is represented equally on social media platforms, and some news items do not get as much attention as others. People who are undecided on or do not feel strongly about a topic will seldom comment on a news item related to it. As Karin Kirk's findings about comments on climate change stories suggest, negative and disapproving comments might be overrepresented on social media so that society appears more polarized and contrary (Kirk 2017). Additionally, the posts that are shown on social media platforms do not make up the totality of those that have actually been submitted. There is usually some kind of moderation by the platforms themselves or by specific users who might remove posts that violate community rules.

Social media communication is also highly contextual. Messages might be coloured by irony, sarcasm, and vague insinuations, which require cultural understanding. Commentary might also refer to other posts or previous comments, as well as specific societal and political events. This is particularly pertinent in this study's research data, which cannot be fully understood without considering the wider context of the pandemic and the specific decision to exempt religious gatherings from COVID-19 restrictions. Close reading and a qualitative method are therefore necessary for the analysis in this study.

To make sure that data focused exclusively on individual, private opinions—as opposed to content from official actors such as politicians, government institutions, and so on—this study collected posts in reaction to news stories on the political decision to exempt religious gatherings from pandemic rules as the relevant corpus data for analysis.

Facebook and Instagram were chosen as the platforms from which to gather this data; they have a suitable structure of public posts and news items posted on these platforms tend to receive a considerable number of comments. From both platforms, the profiles of seven news outlets were selected. This included Tagesschau and ZDF heute, the two main news programmes of German public TV, as well as Bild, n-tv, Spiegel, Focus and Welt, which were the most visited news websites at the time of the study (IVW 2021). On the Facebook and Instagram pages of each news service, a search was performed to locate posts about the permission of religious gatherings in Germany. The study found seven Facebook posts from four news outlet profiles and five Instagram posts from three news outlet profiles. The selected news items were all posted at the

end of April and beginning of May 2020.<sup>3</sup> The comments under each of these twelve news items make up the final corpus. They were collected through web scraping— “a procedure whereby a computer program automatically saves [...] data from a website and puts it into a particular format” (Kozinets 2020: 239). Instagram posts were scraped with the opensource tool Instaloader (version 4.7.6) and for Facebook comments, a programme to scrape comments was written for this study. The final corpus consists of the text of 2,203 Facebook and 688 Instagram comments.

## 6. Method: Qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis

Even though Michael Bergunder tried to conceptualize the unexplained Religion 2 in order to make it a researchable object, “naming history” is not a method in a narrow sense. He mentions “that genealogy is a theory and not a method” (Bergunder 2014: 271). Bergunder’s approach is based on poststructuralist discourse theories. Discourse analysis, albeit empirical and concerned with the text, is strictly speaking not a method; instead, it makes use of a vast interdisciplinary field of methods (Angermüller 2014: 21–25).

When selecting methods within the framework of poststructuralist discourse theory, it may be useful to choose interpretative approaches in a broad sense because of the emphasis on language and discourse (Nonhoff 2011: 99). Coding techniques have been developed in the context of interpretative-hermeneutic theories, but they can also be usefully applied in discourse analysis. As part of discourse-analytical studies, these coding techniques can be helpful to uncover rules of discourse and thus rules of the constitution of meaning and hence of the production of social reality (Glasze/Husseini/Mose 2009: 294). They can be employed as a sub-step of discourse analysis, as long as it is noted that the conceptual status of coding is different from that of interpretative-hermeneutic epistemologies and that they are adapted accordingly to the theoretical presuppositions (Glasze/Husseini/Mose 2009: 293–299).

An example of this method of interpretative coding, which also has a strong focus on comprehensibility and transparency, is the qualitative content analysis by Philipp Mayring. Compensating for the lack of instruments and techniques in discourse analysis with content analysis can be fruitful due to the similarities between the two. Both tend to examine communication fixed in signs, which is frequently found in text, have similar research interests, and apply qualitative as well as quantitative methods (Wedl/Herschinger/Gasteiger 2014: 537).

Nevertheless, discourse analysis and content analysis have decisive differences that should also be taken into consideration. These lie in the respective degree of theoretical foundation and methodological systematization. In contrast to discourse analysis, which is not a method, content analysis focuses primarily on a strongly regulated procedure with precise rules. The issue of truth, on the other hand, is not reflected upon very much in content analysis, which suggests the assumption of a reality that exists outside of the communication, which can be unambiguously understood and captured by the analysis (Wedl/Herschinger/Gasteiger 2014: 539–543). While

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<sup>3</sup> See section 11 (list of social media sources).

content analyses must be measured against general quality criteria and must strive for objectivity, for discourse analysis, above all, comprehensibility and plausibility must hold true. Both attempt to describe, but content analysis looks for meaning, while discourse analysis is interested in the structure of discourse and the rules of knowledge production. Content analysis tools can be useful for discourse analyses if they are used for specific questions and subject to adaptation and translation (Wedl/Herschinger/Gasteiger 2014: 552–557).

Even though the method is known as qualitative content analysis, Mayring does not consider this to be the best term to describe it (Mayring/Fenzl 2019: 634). The method focuses on more than the content of communication and works with categorization (Mayring 2015: 13). Furthermore, the so-called qualitative content analysis can actually be considered a mixed-method approach. It assigns categories to text as a qualitative step but oftentimes also analyses frequencies of categories as a quantitative step (Mayring 2014: 10). A crucial principle of qualitative content analysis is its systematic and rule-bound procedure, for which a concrete procedural model of analysis is defined, which, however, must be fitted to suit the particular object or material (Mayring 2014: 39).

As an aid to analysis in this study and to ensure correct adherence to the procedural model, software was developed specifically for qualitative content analysis according to Mayring. QCMap is an open access interactive web application that was used for this study's analysis (Mayring 2014: 117–122).

The first step was to decide on a concrete research question, which was the following: “What attitudes toward religion and the importance of religious practice can be found in responses to allowing in-person religious practice during the COVID-19 pandemic?” Next, a content analysis technique was chosen, in this case, inductive category formation. As a coding unit, it was suitable for this analysis to assign codes to complete comments. According to this selection criterion, only comments that clearly referred to religion, religious communities, or religious gatherings were coded, which excluded comments whose meaning could be interpreted ambiguously and general opinions on COVID-19 measures. The level of abstraction determined that a category should specify a positive or negative attitude toward religion or religious practice. Categories could be added, deleted, or changed during the coding process. Comments could receive several codes if they expressed opinions related to multiple categories (Mayring 2014: 79–83).

This step of the analysis looked at the comments on the exemption of religious gatherings from COVID-19 restrictions and produced categories of attitudes for the posters, as well as their underlying understandings of religion. The discourse was structured to make it possible to see its regularities, partaking parties, and the distribution of attitudes.

By categorizing the comments according to commentators' opinions on the news, it became clear that the discourse focused on general attitudes on religion and the relationship between state and religion, rather than the specific exemption for religious gatherings. These general opinions also reveal how the public seems to understand religion. Therefore, this corpus can be analysed

as an excerpt of the discourse on religion. The end goal of the analysis was to trace the specific articulations of religion and the commentators' underlying interests.

## 7. Results

### Qualitative content analysis

The following table (table 1) summarizes the results of the qualitative content analysis, which identified 13 categories of attitudes on the exemption for religious communities. The total count indicates how many times each category was assigned to a comment. The table also shows in what percentage of the corpus a category occurred. The last two columns indicate in how many of the comment sections of the twelve posts a category was found – in total numbers and percentages.

Category	Total count	% of corpus	No. of posts	% of posts
Religion is irrelevant / useless / stupid	389	25	12	100
Higher/equal relevance of other social activities	235	15	12	100
Criticism of the churches	141	9	11	91
In-person religious practice is unnecessary	139	9	12	100
Critical of / hostile to Islam	106	7	10	83
In-person attendance is fine as hygiene measures can easily be observed	104	6	11	91
Religion is relevant	91	6	11	91
In-person religious practice is necessary	72	4	11	91
Defence against hostility toward religion	66	4	8	66
Religious practice is a constitutional right	56	3	10	83
Benefits of religious institutions	47	3	8	66
Religion is dangerous	34	2	9	75
Criticism of lack of separation of state and religion	34	2	6	50

Table 1. Distribution of categories

The categories on attitudes toward religion and religious practice provide a good overview of public opinion on religion, and by extension, on state support of religious institutions. Even in a rather small corpus, all categories are stable discourse positions found in a majority of posts, often in all of them.



The importance of religious beliefs and practices to individuals and society is consistently undermined. The category “Religion is irrelevant / useless / stupid” makes up a quarter of all assigned codes. Comments in this category make fun of or insult religion and those who are religious. For example: “This bullshit religion is completely dispensable and unimportant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” and “Which semi-intelligent person still believes in such crap?”<sup>4</sup>

In some cases, religion is not only considered to be useless and stupid but also dangerous:

“ Then I suppose the IS is doing some good for everyone? The Crusaders were playing Red Cross? Al Qaeda were people of honour on 9/11. The cults are doing a good job with their manipulations. The church is not harming anyone with their mass meetings despite Corona. How deluded are you exactly?

In other categories, the commentators may not be disparaging religion, however, in the face of the particular risks that the pandemic presents, they express that religious practice should not be given special treatment. Specifically, in the second most common category, comparisons are made between religious gatherings and other common social practices, with the conclusion that the former are not more important than the latter. Religion is interpreted as a personal interest or an individual hobby in these cases. For example: “Why is one allowed to practice their religion but not their hobbies?” and “Isn't the practice of religion also a personal matter, like watching football matches or concerts, and should therefore also take a back seat in public?”

Another popular category is more specifically about how religious practice does not necessarily have to take the form of in-person gatherings: “Why don't they pray at home? Doesn't that still count, or does it help less? Religion is a private matter.”

Another significant part of negative comments about religion consists of criticism of the church, which is often used synonymously with the Catholic Church, even when this is not further specified. The criticism is attributed to factors such as the church's assumed greed, cases of sexual abuse, and intolerant doctrines. Critics do not necessarily take issue with religion itself, but with its institutions, leading them to similar conclusions as prior groups who feel religious institutions should not receive special treatment around COVID-19 restrictions. These comments imply discontent with the current relationship between the state and religious communities; in another category, comments were collected that explicitly criticize a too-close connection between those two actors.

Finally, another significant part of the negative comments towards religion consists of criticism and hateful comments toward Islam and Muslims, who are accused of not following COVID-19 restrictions or having too much influence on German politicians. Some theorized that the government allowed religious gatherings because it was around the beginning of Ramadan.

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<sup>4</sup> All quotes are my own translations of German comments. To protect the privacy of the commentators, no references are cited.

Not all positions were negative and disapproving toward religion and the decision to allow religious gatherings. As a counterpart to the categories that consider religion to be irrelevant, one category emphasized the importance of religion in people's lives: "The economy is important, but it's not everything. And for many people, including myself, faith in God also plays an important role."

There is also a category of comments that explain the importance of in-person religious gatherings by correlating it to the value of community and rituals. These commentators reject the notion that religion is exclusively an individual and private matter: "But your form of faith should not be imposed on others, for many the sacraments are very important... The forms of worship are also extremely limited 😊." Additionally, other comments come to the defence of religious institutions, by expressing that not all institutions are bad and that churches contribute positively to society.

Other categories defend the decision around the exemption of religious gatherings from lockdown rules, without necessarily expressing a positive attitude towards religion or religious institutions. They justify their position by asserting that preventative measures against the spread of the virus can easily be implemented in church services, rendering the practice safe. In another important category, people refer to the Constitution and the right to practice one's religion publicly. Finally, a category of comments can be identified that counters offensive comments toward religious people by asking for tolerance and respect regardless of one's own faith.

As with all social media comments and especially given their quantitative distribution, these comments are not necessarily representative of wider society's attitude. However, the discourse is at least a partial reflection of society and since each articulation is (re)producing religion, these quantitative results cannot be disregarded.

### Discourse on religion

Starting from these formed categories, some common understandings of religion and their correlation with the categories can be presented. The content analysis focused on attitudes towards the exemption of religious gatherings from lockdown rules. Looking at this discourse on religion, it becomes clear that sides for and against this decision exhibit different understandings of religion. The social media comments include quite different characteristics in each of the categories.

The news items discussing the exemption present religion, including (public) religious practice, as worth protecting, more so than other social practices. As a primary reaction, most commentators seem to reject this specific construction of religion. Those who approve of the exemption, in turn, provide a secondary tide of reaction, this time to the disapproving comments.

With a focus on the discursive constitution of religion, this structure can also be understood in the sense that certain understandings of religion are expressed first, and then attempts are made to correct or add to them, as those understandings are considered wrong or insufficient. An

example of this negotiation process is the following three comments. One person raises the question: “And you are not allowed to pray at home, huh?” Another person answers: “Prayer at home is important. Nevertheless, the most important thing is the reception of Holy Communion in the Divine Liturgy!” Whereupon the first-person comments: “I thought the most important thing was faith.”

Many negative comments, meaning those that express disapproval towards the decision to loosen the restrictions for religious communities, focus on God, supernatural beings, and people’s belief in the former: “And what will you pray for then? That he should take that crap away again? Ask the figment of your imagination why he sent it?” And “God does not exist. Therefore, one should really stop pretending that religion is something legitimate in any way and rather put the resources on the active solution of the problems.” According to these commentators, religious communities should not be granted influence and privileges because God does not exist. Thus, they see no elements of religion other than God or similar concepts, that would legitimize its influence.

These commentators also explicitly negate material aspects as defining elements of religiosity: “So you need a church to access God? I thought the Bible says that God is everywhere. So why do you need a church and church services?” and “A true believer does not need idols and buildings to live out their faith.”

Common fillings of religion or primary associations with the concept in categories that express negative attitudes about the decision to allow religious gatherings or about religion more generally are Religion is a personal, individual, and private matter comparable to a hobby. Faith and prayer are key elements of religion. In modernity, religion is increasingly disappearing. It is backward, unscientific, and equivalent to superstition. The primary association with the topic of religion is the institution of the church (meaning mostly German mainline churches, especially the Catholic Church), which in turn is associated with greed, intolerance, and abuse.

These comments can be contrasted with comments favourable towards the exemption, which mention the positives of religion and religious institutions. Such comments focus on the benefits that religious institutions offer to individuals and society. Likewise, some comments mention the functions of religion to address issues of existential nature. These emphasize that religions—religious faith, religious practice, or religious communities—have value in distressing situations. For example: “It is not about God but about people who get support from their community,” “Part of my faith in Jesus Christ is the connection with others who also take it seriously. That is why I am looking forward to worshipping together again,” and “No, the church doesn’t feed you. However, our society is going through a traumatic experience and for many churches or mosques are places where you find peace and stability.”

Comments in favour of religion in general or of religious gatherings during the pandemic often characterize religion as a collective matter and perceive material aspects and rituals as crucial

elements of religion. For them, religion is still relevant in modernity. It provides a sense of security and gives meaning to life and satisfies spiritual needs.

In most of the identified categories, contrasting counterparts can be found. For example, comments in the categories that stress the irrelevance or even danger of religion and support their argument with statements like God is fictional, can be contrasted with the category that stresses the importance of religion and highlights functions of religion. Another important pair of categories are those that deal specifically with the role of in-person religious gatherings. One side excludes this aspect from what constitutes religion, the other includes it as a constituting factor.

The only two categories that do not have direct counterparts are those that speak explicitly of the religious-political law in Germany. One of the approving arguments is the constitutional right to freedom of religion and one disapproving argument criticizes the lack of separation of state and religion. There are however no categories with comments that do not want freedom of religion or the separation of state and religion. The debate is instead about what constitutes religion and what should therefore be protected by the state. This shows how those who are against the exemption on religious gatherings are not primarily aiming to restrict religious freedom; their understanding of religion determines what should fall under the protection of the right to religious freedom. One comment says: “You’re still allowed to believe in these invented gods at any time. The freedom of religion is still given.”

Different attempts to consolidate the meaning of religion thus have different consequences for political attitudes. Or put differently, the enforcement of certain political interests is carried out via certain fixations of religion. Thus, religious-political conflicts are also characterized by negotiation processes about religion.

## 8. Critical reflection on researching Religion 2

This study follows Michael Bergunder’s suggestion for research in the study of religion. The object of such a study is Religion 2, a consensus-capable, contemporary, everyday understanding of religion. The findings from this extract of the contemporary, everyday discourse on religion, however, do not indicate a consensus on the concept of religion, at least not in every dimension. The discourse on religion, articulations about religion, does not occur neutrally or in a vacuum. In this case, discourse has arisen in reaction to a political decision that grants rights to certain people and not others. Commentators expressed their understandings of religion in that specific context. In researching natural, everyday articulations on religion, it soon becomes clear that these are always embedded in a context of specific interests, so that different, sometimes conflicting and competing elements of religion are uttered, depending on those interests.

Reflecting on Bergunder’s article, which this study is based on, its context must be taken into account, as well. Bergunder’s approach has developed into a project of “global religious history” (see, e.g., Bergunder 2020; 2021), which was initially called for in the 2014 article. Focusing on this project makes sense since it was the growing awareness of the historical genesis of religion

and the difficulty of applying the concept to global, non-European contexts that brought a fundamental crisis to the discipline (Krüger 2022: 80–81). The establishment of Religion 2 is supposed to be a way out of the failing attempts to define religion. Moreover, to “increase our understanding of Religion 2, more research in the global religious history of the 19th and 20th centuries is urgently required” (Bergunder 2014: 280). As this religious history is supposed to be a genealogy, its starting point and context is always the contemporary understanding of religion (Bergunder 2014: 270).

These statements and the specific focus and context of this approach can give the impression that the starting point of a contemporary, everyday understanding of religion is very well known—even though it remains unexplained and not reflected upon. They also give the impression that religion was a contested concept up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when it was conclusively sedimented and there are currently no more alternative understandings available. This would, of course, contradict the applied poststructuralist theories that deny the possibility of fixed and closed meaning. Bergunder clarifies that he “in no way meant to establish the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a historical watershed that essentially defined religion once and for all” (Bergunder 2014: 272). He also emphasizes that “ ‘historical’ is understood here as concerning a concrete and unique phenomenon in space and time, and not simply in the general sense of ‘pertaining to an event in the past’ ” (Bergunder 2014: 255). The present study has taken this seriously and applies the idea of a “naming history” of religion to a current discourse.

The title of the article is “What is religion?”. However, the question that can be raised from a postcolonial perspective is “Who is religion?”. One example of attempts to define religion, which implicitly take Religion 2 as a reference point, is Benson Saler who declares Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to be prototypes of religion, although the claim is not further substantiated. Another example is the assertion by William James, who deemed Buddhism to be a religion because it has all the characteristics people usually understand to belong to a religion (Bergunder 2014: 250–251). In the studied data, however, questions of inclusion and exclusion of certain groups under the category of religion did not occur. This is not to say that “Who is religion?” is not relevant in religious-political conflict in the contemporary global North. In the context of the news items and the specific political decision, however, people did seem to share a consensus of who belongs under the category of religion. Implicitly or explicitly, the comments referred mostly to Christian church services or Islamic prayer and no alternatives were debated.

As already mentioned, an uncontested consensus could also be identified about the right to religious freedom and (at least in principle) the separation of state and religion. But debates about the understanding of religion also appeared and this extract of the discourse on religion did not present an uncontested consensus. Instead, conflicting answers to the question “What is religion?” were given. When tracing the contemporary, everyday understanding of religion, researchers will come across different inclusions and exclusions and therefore different constitutions of religion. Those who spoke of religion as an inner faith were in the majority and usually the primary comments, but alternative understandings were presented as well.

## 9. Tracing past contributions to the discourse on religion

The focus on the present discourse on religion, which is emphasized in this study, does not deny the necessity of historical—meaning related to past events—research. Knowledge about the current discourse on religion can act as the foundation for analysing past articulations to understand how the current meaning came to be. The following section briefly sketches how findings from such historical research could complement the present contemporary study.

Discourses are shaped by power structures and also (re)produce them at the same time. Power and knowledge are intertwined insofar as power can make knowledge true and power is exercised through knowledge (Angermüller 2014: 23). Power, as Michel Foucault understood it, “produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault 1977a: 194). Therefore, in addition to the question “What is religion?”, it is relevant for this kind of analysis to answer the question “Who said so?”. For some of the elements in the present discourse on religion, actors who presented religion in such a way will be mentioned briefly so that the definitions of religion that were most often repeated can be traced.

The first actors to mention are the scholars whose contributions shaped the concept of religion. As many of the commentators in this study pointed out, religion is no longer relevant because it is supposedly backward and not compatible with modernity— an assumption that has been the dominant paradigm in the sociology of religion for more than the first half of the 20th century. The hypothesis that modernization inevitably leads to the decline of religion was widely accepted among scholars up until the 1980s (Berger 2014: IX; Pollack 2014: 1). José Casanova argues that this is one of the main reasons for the actual decline of religion in Europe. He asserts that, in the style of a self-fulfilling prophecy, secularization theories became the accepted description of the development of religion in modern societies for the majority of the population and led to real consequences for the religiosity of people (Casanova 2007: 338).

Another actor emerges in light of the analysed data, which is the media. The comments were written in the context of news articles. Mass media can be seen as a hegemonic setting for the production and distribution of discourses (Meier/Wedl 2014: 411). Judith Stander-Dulisch analysed the media coverage of religion in the German popular magazines *Stern* and *Spiegel* from 1960 to 2014. One of her findings is the frequent criticism of Christian churches, specifically the Catholic Church (as opposed to the Protestant Church in Germany, which is hardly mentioned). Reports of scandals and ethical violations in the Catholic Church dominate the articles (Standar-Dulisch 2019: 203). This correlates very well with the findings of this study. Religion and Christianity are often associated with the church institutions and the problems surrounding them. Generally, these refer to the Catholic Church even when not explicitly stated. It is one of the strategies of people who support religious communities to mention that not every church representative behaves unethically, that these institutions can have benefits for society, and that other places and institutions of worship exist in Germany. They try to present religion and churches in a different way than the mass media has done for decades.

One argument critics of the exemption of religious gatherings made frequently is that religion is supposed to be an individual, private matter and should thus be strictly separated from matters of the public sphere. Meanwhile proponents of religious communities also seemed to support the separation of state and religion. The separation of religion and politics as it is known today originated in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century with John Locke, who was one of the most influential theorists in this arena (Fitzgerald 2007: 214). “By privatizing religion as the individual’s relationship with a transcendent God it became possible to think of it as a distinct domain separate from the public arena” (Fitzgerald 2007: 15). The privatization of religion made possible the emergence of a public sphere with its laws and markets that, unlike private ideologies and traditions, seem to follow objective and natural rules. The separation of religion and state was fundamental for new forms of economy and society and the liberal-capitalist idea of the West (Fitzgerald 2007: 235; Führling 2019: 347–49).

Another source to trace the genesis of the current understanding of religion also features in Bergunder’s article. Ernst Feil wrote a four-volume work about the history of the concept of religion. While Bergunder found many faults in this work, he also praised it for its significant expansion of the state of research on the history of religion (Bergunder 2011: 21). It is being mentioned briefly in this paper because Feil identifies a modern understanding of religion that is characterized by inwardness. He assumes that this was born out of Protestant ideals, mainly attributed to Schleiermacher (Feil 1986: 24–25; Feil 2007: 880–881). This study’s data analysis showed that a lot of people expressed such an understanding of religion. Since the topic of the discussion was collective religious practice, those disapproving of its permission named personal, inner faith as the central element of religion.

Lastly, the legal and regulatory actors in Germany should also be mentioned, specifically in their favourable treatment of religion. During the pandemic, the government explicitly mentioned the beneficial aspects of religion for individuals, such as giving strength in times of crisis (Bundesregierung 2020b). The practice of religion, which includes in-person religious gatherings, is part of what is protected by the right to religious freedom, as was also ruled by the Federal Constitutional Court. The specific construction of religion by German legislation can be found in some of the comments, albeit in a minority of the corpus.

## 10. Conclusion

As in other areas, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a specific political decision in it led to the raising and discussion of fundamental questions about the religious-political order. This was also reflected in online discourse, specifically, social media comments. In an analysis of this data, existing conflicts and diverging interests and strategies were made visible. The commentary was taken as an extract of the discourse on religion to analyse the contemporary, everyday understanding of religion. The comments showed how the struggle over the role of religion in society and its relationship to the state is related to the struggle over defining the very concept of religion.

This shows that debates about the definition of religion are not exclusive to the study of religion but happen in society all the time. Additionally, these have serious consequences for political discourse, especially conflicts about the relationship between religion and state. The study demonstrates the value of researching Religion 2 and ongoing discourse to reveal insights on current conflicts about policies related to religion.

The study also showed that the discourse on religion has its place in current political discussions. Due to their respective sets of interests, people do not express a consensual, uncontested contemporary, everyday understanding of religion. For this approach of researching Religion 2, it is crucial to emphasize that each articulation of the concept of religion is a new creation and only attempts of temporary fixation of meaning can happen. It is therefore also a task within the study of religion to keep an eye on the constant new creations of religion.

## 11. List of social media sources

Bild. 2020. Instagram, 29/04/2020.

[https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_jWaqNocan/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_jWaqNocan/) (06/09/2021).

Der Spiegel. 2020. Facebook, 24/04/2020.

<https://www.facebook.com/derspiegel/posts/10158840025819869> (06/09.2021).

Focus Online. 2020. Facebook, 24/04/2020.

<https://www.facebook.com/focus.de/posts/10158723107209410> (06/09/2021).

Focus Online. 2020. Facebook, 30/04/2020.

<https://www.facebook.com/focus.de/posts/10158748433244410> (06/09/2021).

Focus Online. 2020. Facebook, 30/04/2020.

<https://www.facebook.com/focus.de/posts/10158748039884410> (06/09/2021).

Tagesschau. 2020. Facebook, 17/04/2020.

<https://www.facebook.com/tagesschau/posts/10158512638899407> (06/09/2021).

Tagesschau. 2020. Facebook, 3/05/2020.

<https://www.facebook.com/tagesschau/posts/10158577831969407> (06/09/2021).

Tagesschau. 2020. Instagram, 3/05/2020.

[https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_vITJHiupn/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_vITJHiupn/) (06/09/2021).

ZDF heute. 2020. Instagram, 23/04/2020.

[https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_VNKwRqwVD/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_VNKwRqwVD/) (06/09/2021).

ZDF heute. 2020. Facebook, 27/04/2020.

<https://www.facebook.com/ZDFheute/posts/10158497789780680> (06/09/2021).

ZDF heute. 2020. Instagram, 27/04/2020.

[https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_fypPLKRsx/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_fypPLKRsx/) (06/09/2021).

ZDF heute. 2020. Instagram, 3/05/2020.

[https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_u2tQFppWd/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_u2tQFppWd/) (06/09/2021).



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