



Patterns of change in religious authority: Routinization, oligarchization and institutionalization

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Published on 05/05/2026

Abstract

The article explores classical theoretical debates on the routinization of authority. It departs from Max Weber's sociology of power and his considerations on the routinization of charisma and discusses it in relation to Robert Michels' concept of oligarchization and notions of institutionalization as a process of reciprocal typification in the Sociology of Knowledge. Based on a comparative discussion of the commonalities and differences of these approaches, I propose a working understanding for the empirical analysis of the routinization of religious authority. In line with the overarching focus of the special issue, I will put particular emphasis on religious minority-majority constellations and mediatization as conditions of routinization.

1. Introduction

Like all other social facts and despite its own inherent striving for eternity religious authority has always been subject to change. As a matter of fact, this transformation is closely aligned with changes in the social form or structure of religious groups. Driving forces for transformation can be both external (e.g., regulations for religious communities in a diaspora context) or internal (e.g., tensions and schisms along doctrinal controversies or intergenerational dynamics).

In this article, I will concentrate on one specific pattern of authority change, namely the routinization of authority. In the first section, I will explore classical theoretical debates on routinization departing from Max Weber's sociology of domination. Rather than undertaking yet another in-depth exegesis of his work, I seek to relate Weber's reasoning on the routinization of charisma with later debates in social theory, such as Robert Michels' concept of oligarchization and the notion of institutionalization as a process of reciprocal typification within the Sociology of Knowledge. In the second section, I will propose a working understanding for the empirical analysis of the routinization of religious authority and briefly explore its implications for the two focus areas of this special issue, namely the authority change in or through minority-majority constellations and mediatization.

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To quote this article: Nagel, Alexander-Kenneth. 2026. "Patterns of change in religious authority: Routinization, oligarchization and institutionalization." *ARGOS* 5 (2), Special Issue *Contested, Conflated, Converted: Dynamics of Religious Authority in Minority Constellations and Digital Media*, 15–33. DOI: 10.26034/fr.argos.2026.9756.



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Even though a discussion of religious authority change could also have focused on *the prophet* as an emblem of religious innovation, I will concentrate on the conservative nature of authority that is closely associated with the ideal-typical figure of *the priest* and the persistence of religious institutions: The prophetic spark may give rise to new religious movements and ideas and is rooted in an intensive cultic milieu which resembles what early sociologist of religion had called “sects” (Troeltsch 1925; Weber 1985). Yet, as these communities grow and expand, they are likely to face some sort of churchification in the sense of a stratification of power and a canonization of teachings. Whereas these dynamics of institutionalization are largely endogenous, I will argue in the following that they have been strongly influenced by external factors, such as media change and migration.

2. Routinization – oligarchization – institutionalization:

A brief theoretical history of authority change

In this section, I revisit classic works on routinization, oligarchization and institutionalization which I regard as facets of the same phenomenon of authority change, namely the increasing structuration of authority over time. Needless to say, each of these strands have produced volumes of scholarly debates which cannot be dealt with in one article in a satisfactory manner. As a consequence, I do not aim at a comprehensive reconstruction or historical contextualization of the respective discussions, but will combine glimpses of the original text with a selective grasp on the state of research as far as it takes religious authority structures into account. While Weber’s sociology of domination is well-established in religious studies, Michels’ account of oligarchization has received less attention although it offers an interesting actor-centred variation of Weber’s approach. Furthermore, it opens up a promising avenue for interdisciplinary exchange between religious studies, political science, and political sociology. And while Berger and Luckmann are widely received in religious studies for their respective sociologies of religion, their theory of institutionalization as part of their joint endeavour for a Sociology of Knowledge still calls to be discovered (Krüger 2012: 140–156).

Max Weber and the routinization of charisma

In his magnum opus *Economy and Society*, Max Weber did not only outline his vision for a sociology of religion in the so-called *Zwischenbetrachtung* (Kippenberg/Riesebrodt 2001), but also the foundations of his sociology of domination. Even though his work had stronger repercussions in American sociology and there are new translations at hand (Weber 2019), I will stick with the classic translation of Talcott Parsons (Weber 1978) and relate it to the German original if clarification is needed. Once again, it should be noted that the following paragraphs are not supposed to provide a thorough reconstruction of Weber’s theory of authority, but only to recollect some of his basic concepts.

In his “Basic Sociological Terms” Weber defines power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance” and domination as “the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons” (Weber 1978: 53). First, the focus on probabilities underlines the inherently *empirical impetus* of these terms which depart from an observable instance of social interaction (e.g., a command is given and followed; resistance is exerted and overcome) and then inquire into the subjective “meaning” (*Sinn*) of the actors. In this sense, Weber’s approach is strictly interpretative and actor-centred. Second, both definitions conceive of power or authority as qualities of social relations (see also the introduction (Kalender/El-Wereny/Nagel 2026) and the article by Kalender and Neumaier (2026) in this special issue). Hence, being powerful or authoritative is not an attribute of a given actor, but a relational capacity. As such, domination involves a distinct constellation of actor roles, namely the sender and the receiver of a given command. In this constellation, the validity (*Geltung*) of the sender’s authority depends on the receivers’ compliance with his or her command.

The compliance of the receivers is anchored in their “belief in legitimacy” of the command (Weber 1978: 213). According to Weber,



claims to legitimacy may be based on:

1. Rational grounds—resting on a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands (legal authority).
2. Traditional grounds—resting on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them (traditional authority); or finally,
3. Charismatic grounds—resting on devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him (charismatic authority). (Weber 1978: 215)

Needless to say, these categories have provoked intensive scholarly debates in sociology and political science reaching from attempts of reconstruction and systematization (Matheson 1987) to fundamental criticism of the underlying psychological assumptions (Spencer 1970). At the same time, the sociology of religion and religious studies have largely concentrated on charismatic authority (Riesebrodt 1999). It also appears as if the interest of scholars of religion in theoretical matters of religious authority has not become more pronounced during the last decades even though the social scientific study of religion has gained significant ground.

As mentioned earlier, I will not embark in an own exegesis of Weber’s ideal-types of legitimate authority here, but only formulate three observations: First, it is noteworthy that legal and traditional authority refer to some kind of system of rules (be they codified or not) while charismatic authority refers to “the exemplary character of an individual person”. Second, the claim to legitimacy of legal and traditional authority is based on the “belief” (of the receiver of a given command) whereas, charismatic rule is rooted in a relationship of “devotion”.

And third, even though religious studies have not taken too much conceptual interest in the rational and traditional grounds of legitimacy, both have of course been prominent in the history of religion. The development of canonical law and the inheritance of authority positions by physical descent (e.g., in Hindu or Yezidi caste systems or in Shia Islam) or spiritual lineage (Baumann 2018) are just a few prominent examples.

It is remarkable that Weber spends more pages on routinization (“the routinization of charisma”) than on “charismatic authority” in general. Semantically, the term routinization diverges from the German original *Veralltäglichung*. While *Veralltäglichung* is rather figurative and emphasizes the transformation from an extraordinary into an everyday phenomenon, routinization carries more abstract implications of standardization, habitualization and formalization. According to Weber, there are two main components of routinization, namely the “problem of succession” and the continuation of the “charismatic community” (Weber 1978: 246).

The problem of succession addresses the inherently personal character of charismatic authority and the question how charismatic rule can continue after the death of the original charismatic leader. Weber has distinguished various “solutions” for this problem and extensively refers to the history of religions for examples. These solutions include the search for a new charismatic leader based on certain criteria or qualities (e.g., the Dalai Lama), techniques of divination (e.g., oracle, revelation), acts of designation, be it by the original leader or prominent figures of the “staff” (e.g., Apostles), transmission through heredity (e.g., aristocratic dynasties) or transfer of charisma through ritual means (e.g., “anointing, consecration, or the laying on of hands”) (Weber 1978: 246–248). At any rate, all of these mechanisms lead to a depersonalization of charisma and hence, the transformation of charismatic into traditional or legal authority. As far as the transmission of charisma is based on a certain procedure whose legitimacy depends on the qualification of the staff, personal charisma is turned into “charisma of office” as a pathway to legal authority. As far as the transmission is based on heredity or habit, its legitimacy depends on a strand of tradition, thus turning personal charisma into “hereditary charisma” as a pathway to traditional authority (Weber 1978: 248).

The continuation of the charismatic community requires to overcome the “anti-economic character” of charismatic rule. As charismatic movements grow and persist, they will turn into organizations in order to serve the material needs of both leader and staff. According to Weber, “It follows that, in the course of routinization, the charismatically ruled organization is largely transformed into one of the everyday authorities” (Weber 1978: 251). This transformation has far-reaching consequences as it establishes a boundary between “laity” and “clergy” and thus marks the beginning of priesthood and churchification. As a consequence, the administrative staff takes part in the economic success of the organization. Here, routinization does not so much refer to the de-personalization of charisma, but to structural transformations within the community, such as labour division, professionalization, and stratification. As far as the staff develops an economic interest in its positions, these considerations resemble Michels’ concept of oligarchization (see below). At this point it is important to add that according to Weber,

“[e]conomic conditions [...] play a leading role and do not constitute merely a dependent variable” in the routinization of charisma (Weber 1978: 254). As a consequence, it seems reasonable to assume that routinization cannot be explained by endogenous institutional dynamics alone, but always depends on external socioeconomic factors.

It is beyond the scope of this article to map the complex research landscape which has emerged from Weber’s concept of routinization. Still, I would like to indicate some trends concerning its application to religious phenomena. Broadly speaking, scholarly contributions oscillate between a confirmatory approach taking Weber’s considerations as a blueprint to reconstruct the history of a given religious tradition and a strategy of falsification which seeks to criticize his concepts based on case studies. An example for the former is an article by Charles Bosk, who presented a case study of routinization in Hasidic Judaism (Bosk 1979) and used Weber’s concept as a heuristic to explore how the role of “Zaddik” as a Jewish authority figure had changed over time. While he criticized that Weber had not sufficiently considered “symbolic resources” (Bosk 1979: 166), by and large Bosk copied both Weber’s notion of routinization and his bold universal historical method. Much in contrast, Werner Stark critically revisited Weber’s analysis of Roman Catholicism as a case of routinization (Stark 1965). He argued that the evolutionist vantage point of Weber’s theory fostered a linear perspective and faded out what he called “the periodical re-awakening of charisma” (Stark 1965: 206). Based on an analysis of routinization in three domains of the Catholic church (canon law, rational theology and art), Stark held that, the

“ Church has not fallen victim to a process of bureaucratization because she has at all times carried within her both bureaucratic figures and charismatic ones, both priests and saints. (Stark 1965: 207)

As instructive as they may be, these early contributions point to some challenges in the application of Weber’s concept of routinization: First, as Stark has underlined, the concept is part of a more encompassing teleological theory of rationalization and hence incapable of addressing the internal contradictions and dynamics between charismatic authority on the one hand and legal and traditional authority on the other. Second, and on a related note, the universal historical method carries the risk of degrading the history of religions to a mere projection surface for heroic ideas of modernization theory. At the same time, however, in-depth case studies will always produce evidence to shatter the very foundations of such theories. Hence, from an empirical standpoint, the concept of routinization calls for further operationalization. To this end, I will use the following sections to review some of the theoretical contributions that built on Weber’s work and sought to develop it further.

Robert Michels and the “Iron Law of Oligarchization”

In the year 1911, the German-Italian sociologist Robert Michels presented his book *Political parties: A sociological study of the oligarchical tendencies of modern democracy*, which was translated into English in 1915. The very fact that Michels dedicated his work to Max Weber underlines how much he saw his own work influenced by Weber’s ideas. At the same time,

Michels concentrated on a specific configuration of authority, namely the formation of will in (formally) democratic organizations such as parties or political movements. While not explicitly concerned with religion, Michels had taken a strong interest in political ideology, namely in Socialism, and conceived of charisma as the revolutionary spark which pervaded the early forms of the working-class movement. Not least out of his personal disappointment with Socialism, he formulated his so-called “Iron Law of Oligarchy” (Michels 1915: 377), borrowing from Weber’s expression “iron cage” (Weber 1930: 181) that he had put forward in his *Protestant Ethic*:

“ According to this view, the government [...] cannot be anything other than the organization of a minority. It is the aim of this minority to impose upon the rest of society a ‘legal order,’ which is the outcome of the exigencies of dominion and of the exploitation of the mass of helots effected by the ruling minority, and can never be truly representative of the majority. (Michels 1915: 390)

The quote represents Michels’ conviction that effective democratic decision-making cannot be accomplished by all stakeholders, but always involves some sort of delegation and labour division. In the early stage, this internal differentiation can be fluid, however on the long run there will be a growing discrepancy between the elected leaders and the members who elected them. In this regard, the second stage closely resembles Weber’s turning point in the process of routinization that is marked by the distinction between clergy and laity (see above). In line with Weber, Michels considered the emerging bureaucracy as a system of authority based on substantial competences and emphasized the role of epistemic leadership. As bureaucratization leads to a further concentration of power, the elected leaders will put their self-interest over the collective interest and hence weaken the transformative capacities of the party.

A brilliant reconstruction and criticism of Michels’ reasoning was offered by Darcy Leach (2005: 313–315). She argued that Michels’ theory was conceptually underdetermined and could not fruitfully be applied to “nonbureaucratic organizations” as far as they do not exhibit a formal authority structure (Leach 2005: 322). Such nonbureaucratic organizations may include “communes, co-housing projects [...] or activist groups” (Leach 2005: 332), but Leach’s notion might as well be extended to religious movements, ashrams or cooperatives that are based on a collectivist democratic idea of self-determination. Apart from that, she called for an empirical investigation of the “Iron Law” and proposed three main “indicators of oligarchy,” namely “lack of leadership turnover, minority control over resources, and low level of participation in governance” (Leach 2005: 316). It can remain open at this point if an organization can maintain a nonbureaucratic shape on the long run. At least the history of the Protestant Church in Germany suggests otherwise: Instead of an *ecclesia semper reformanda* (church in permanent renewal) it has developed into a highly bureaucratic structure mirroring the office structure and remuneration of the state (Schelsky 1957).

While some authors address Weber and Michels as a theoretical unit (Zald/Ash 1966: 327–328; Leach 2005), others have sought to reconstruct their relationship and to spell out their differences. Lawrence Scaff, for example, has identified “substantive disagreement” over the

question whether modernization and authority change should be conceived of in terms of domination (Weber) or democracy (Michels) (Scaff 1981: 1269). As a matter of fact, this overall distinction also translates into different pathways of sociological reasoning: Both Weber and Michels argued that routinization led to the emergence of new carrier strata (*Trägerschichten*) of religious or political ideas, be it priests or Apparatchiks, whose interests had repercussions on the overall belief system. Yet while Weber took a more hermeneutical perspective at the interdependency between worldview, interests, and social action, Michels pointed to the powerplay and struggles within an organization and focused on the rationale and self-interest of the functionaries.

All in all, it may not be surprising that Michels' work has inspired intensive debates in political science and organizational sociology, but has so far not resonated strongly in religious studies. The few contributions which do apply his model to religious organizations are more interested in the study of organizations than religious authority (Eckstein 1977; Nagel 2019). At the same time, early proponents of social movement theory have engaged with the history of religion in order to refine their theoretical arguments. In a classic piece on movement organizations, Mayer Zald and Roberta Ash turned to religious communities with an interest in processes of—what they call—“schismogenesis” (1966: 336–337). Based on a glance at the history of the Roman Catholic Church they concluded that an organization was more likely to split the more heterogenous their constituency and their concern with doctrinal purity:

“ MO's concerned with questions of ultimate ideological truth and with theoretical matters are more likely to split than MO's linked to bread and butter issues. It is not concern with ideology per se that is central to this proposition, but rather that ideological concerns lead to questioning the bases of organizational authority and the behavior of the leadership. (Zald/Ash 1966: 337)

From a religious studies point of view, these considerations are interesting as they counterbalance the materialist and voluntarist tendency of the Oligarchization Theorem with an idealist and constructivist focus. In contrast to Michels' focus on powerplay and vested interests they underscore the Weberian notion that world views and systems of knowledge are not at the immediate disposition of the actors, but are sources of authority in their own right. As I will show in the outlook of this article, these considerations of schismogenesis may also guide the analysis of religious authority change in the context of digital change. In the next section, I will follow the idealist trail of doctrinal authority, symbolic resources, and epistemic leadership, and turn to concepts of institutionalization in the Sociology of Knowledge.

[Institutionalization in a Sociology of Knowledge perspective: Routinization as interactive formation of authority](#)

For the purpose of this article, the Sociology of Knowledge has a lot to offer as it builds on premises of Weber's work and at the same time takes a distinct glance at religious pluralization and the formation of authority in human interaction. In their ground-breaking book *The Social*

Construction of Reality, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann have laid the foundations for a social-constructivist theory of institutionalization. They set out to solve the “paradox that man is capable of producing a world that he then experiences as something other than a human product” (Berger/Luckmann 1966: 78). The essence of their dialectic model reads as follows: “Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product” (Berger/Luckmann 1966: 79). The first sentence underlines that social order “is produced by man in the course of his ongoing externalization” (Berger/Luckmann 1966: 69–70), e.g., by acting according to the rules of a given institution. The second sentence emphasizes that institutions are experienced as objective in the sense of “existing over and beyond the individual” (Berger/Luckmann 1966: 76). And the last sentence refers to humans becoming a product of society through the internalization of social order in the course of socialization. Altogether, the above-mentioned paradox is dissolved into the dialectic setup of externalization, objectification, and internalization. As it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the basic assumptions and propositions of the Sociology of Knowledge at length, I will concentrate on the aspect of institutionalization and routinization.

According to Berger and Luckmann, the authority structure of a given social order is part of its collective store of knowledge. Within the threefold dialectic process outlined above, institutionalization marks a crucial junction between externalization and objectification. In a famous yet somewhat hermetic definition, the authors held that “Institutionalization occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors” (Berger/Luckmann 1966: 72). In order to unpack this definition, it seems helpful to shed light on three different facets, namely habitualization, typification and reciprocity: Habitualization mainly refers to iteration. In this regard, Berger and Luckmann state that,

“ any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort and (...) may be performed again in the future in the same manner. (1966: 70–71)

Here, the basic idea is that frequent iteration leads to standardization which allows psychological relief by reduction of complexity. Typification refers to more abstract categories of actors and actions. Hence, types of actors resemble social roles and may involve particular frames of action. For the question of authority change, the typification of actors is most relevant when it is part of a hierarchical setting and implies the capacity to exert one’s own will on others (Berger and Luckmann offer a “general” and an “archbishop” as examples, 1966: 108). Finally, reciprocity refers to the fact that these typifications are (cognitively) “available to all members of the particular social group” (1966: 72) and hence part of a collective knowledge of the authority structure.

While Weber and Michels emphasized the interpersonal quality of authority and material needs and interests of the respective carrier strata, Berger and Luckmann conceive of authority more implicitly as shared (and widely accepted) knowledge of the social order and role division. It might

be argued that terms like reciprocity and availability underestimate the power asymmetries within institutions. Here, Berger and Luckmann are close to Weber as they underline that domination (in contrast to power) is based on compliance with institutional rules without the need to enforce them. Unlike Weber, however, they base their argument in strong (and contestable) anthropological assumptions, namely Arnold Gehlen's considerations on humans as *Mängelwesen* (flawed beings): From this vantage point, institutions are necessary to compensate for the lack of natural instincts of human beings. As a consequence, institutions are in themselves a necessary feature of humanity, a perspective that has been challenged for its inherent conservatism (Taubes 1970).

Quite similar to Weber, Berger and Luckmann identify authority change and routinization mainly as problems of succession. Yet whereas Weber only discusses routinization in the context of charismatic rule (see above), the Sociology of Knowledge takes a more comprehensive stance on the succession of the social order as a whole in the process of intergenerational transmission. On the one hand, the transmission of authority knowledge to the next generation has the potential to stabilize the social order: "The objectivity of the institutional world 'thickens' and 'hardens', not only for the children, but (by a mirror effect) for the parents as well" (Berger/Luckmann 1966: 76). On the other hand, it calls for legitimation, i.e., an explanation and justification of "the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives" (Berger/Luckmann 1966: 111). In focusing on processes of legitimation rather than forms of legitimate rule, Berger and Luckmann close a gap in Weber's sociology of domination and encourage an empirical investigation of the reproduction of authority structures through socialization and education.

Against this backdrop it is surprising that the Sociology of Knowledge has not been more prominent in scholarly discussions on domination and power as compared to a Foucauldian line of thought on governmentality, which seemed to lend itself to a more encompassing critique of domination and promised to uncover and overcome concealed power asymmetries (Foucault 2011; Wickham/Kendall 2008). Despite these divided lines of reception, however, both the Sociology of Knowledge and Critical Discourse Analysis are concerned with routinization or normalization in the domain of language and communication. In this vein, Berger and Luckmann have addressed language as "the most important item of socialization" as it "appears to the child as inherent in the nature of things, and he cannot grasp the notion of its conventionality" (Berger/Luckmann 1966: 77).

Altogether, the social-constructivist perspective conceives of authority change as a matter of the internalization and legitimation of authority knowledge. While both Weber and Michels promote an actor-centred focus on observable instances of domination in distinct social relationships (Weber) or powerplay based on vested interests (Michels), Berger and Luckmann develop a more structuralist understanding of institutional knowledge as intermediary between individual and society. Since neither of these approaches has inspired a lot of empirical research on authority change in religious communities so far, I will use the next section to outline some of the

systematic characteristics of the routinization of authority and to explore potential avenues of operationalization and methodological access points.

3. Routinization of religious authority: From theory to operationalization

The following table offers a synopsis of the three theoretical strands on routinization outlined above along systematic lines of authority change. While the previous section served to reconstruct some of the arguments from within, I will now take a comparative perspective and work towards an operational understanding of the routinization of religious authority. In doing so, I will concentrate on conceptual and terminological differences between the three approaches and flesh out their distinct heuristic potential for an analysis of religious authority change.

Approach/Item	Weber	Michels	Berger & Luckmann
Authority	Domination and Compliance	Epistemic leadership	Knowledge system; role structure
Routinization of authority	Depersonalization; Transformation of charismatic into legal or traditional authority	Oligarchization: Rule of a minority over a majority; conflict of interests	Cognitive stabilization through habitualization and legitimation
Actors/carrier strata	Laity vs. clergy; charismatic ruler, staff, follower	Apparatchiks vs. helots	Old vs. young; Established vs. Outsiders
Internal factors	Need for succession; growth of charismatic movement; rationalization	Oligarchy as Iron law; growth of political movement	Intergenerational transmission of social order
External factors	Economic conditions of the staff	Electoral success; access to external resources	
Theoretical vantage point	Actor-centred; interpretative; authority as interpersonal relationship	Actor-centred; voluntaristic	Dialectic: knowledge system mediates between individual and society

Table 1: Three strands of routinization theory—A synopsis

In terms of the basic notion of authority and despite their similarities and genealogies, the three approaches highlight different dimensions of religious authority which are associated with different research questions: As Weber emphasizes the distinction between domination and compliance, the question arises what a command might be in a religious context? The term might be stretched to include explicit commands or recommendations of religious specialists such as a penance duty or a fatwa (El-Wereny 2026) or canonized commands, such as the Ten Commandments or other ethical prescriptions. In contrast, Michels' focus on epistemic leadership stresses the role of epistemic leadership as a prerequisite for religious authority, e.g. the knowledge of a cultic language, such as Latin or Sanskrit or a particular academic degree. Finally, Berger and Luckmann point to authority as part of our wider knowledge of the social order and may hence inspire critical questions vis-à-vis the privileged role of religious communities as alleged safeguards of morality in late modern societies.

In terms of routinization, Weber highlights the depersonalization of charisma and the inevitable transformation of charismatic into traditional or legal rule. It is not surprising that this approach resonates strongly with the social dynamics of religious movements past and present. It lends itself to empirical questions how the charismatic quality is produced in social interaction and how religious authorities communicate their lineage to the original source of charisma (Pachurka 2026). In contrast, Michels may help to understand conflicts of interests between a minority of religious leaders (priests) and a majority of adherents (laity), as in recent struggles for a Synodal Way in the Roman-Catholic Church, or with regard to boundary work between liberal and conservative Muslim communities. The Sociology of Knowledge directs our attention to the processes of legitimation which underly the routinization of religious authority and may shed light on theological justifications of religious hierarchies (ecclesiology) or arguments for a religious empowerment of laymen (Freudenberg 2026; Rimestad 2026).

In terms of internal and external factors of the routinization of religious authority, Weber and Michels seek to keep a balance between internal dynamics, which are set into motion by the growth of a religious movement or the death of the charismatic leader, and external driving forces, such as the interest of the clergy in the economic prosperity of the movement or electoral success that grants access to external resources. This perspective can be translated into questions about the degree of professionalization and labour division in a given religious community and the relationship between full-time staff and volunteers. Another set of research questions could refer to the impact of external support on the authority structure of a religious community, be it public funding for welfare services, legal accreditation, or symbolic endorsements. In contrast, Berger and Luckmann put an emphasis on internal factors of routinization, such as the need for intergenerational transmission of the institutional order. This points to questions of how authority structures are addressed in religious education, both inside (catechesis) and outside of religious communities (religious instruction at schools). It should also be noted that intergenerational does not necessarily imply a knowledge transfer between old and young, but can also refer to different migration cohorts within a religious community (see outlook).

Last, but not least, the three approaches start out from different theoretical vantage points which have repercussions on the unit of analysis and the methodology of an empirical investigation of religious authority change. Both Weber and Michels propose an actor-centred perspective, albeit in different shape: while Michels promotes a voluntarist notion of religious leaders as rational actors seeking to maximize their individual benefit, Weber invites us to conceive of authority change in terms of interpersonal relations (within the triangle of ruler, staff and followers) and stresses that social action goes beyond an instrumentally rational (*zweckrational*) orientation. In both cases, however, the methodological setup should allow to include the subjective meaning of individual actors, e.g., through interview research or the analysis of diaries or similar sources. In comparison, Berger and Luckmann can be located (somewhat) closer towards a macro pole of social theory. Although they emphasize the dialectic between individual and society and the crucial role of individual actors in the continuous externalization of social reality, they also hold that the institutional order is not simply at the actors' disposition. As a consequence, they encourage us to analyse religious authority as part of a particular knowledge system which may translate into different methodological strategies from discourse analysis to participant observation of religious education practices.

All in all, it has shown that routinization of authority is not restricted to Weber's original notion of *Veralltäglichung*, i.e., a transition from the extraordinary to the ordinary. Instead, it is also marked by structural stabilization (through iteration, habitualization and oligarchization), professionalization (in the sense of an increasing division of labour and the extension of full-time staff) and expansion (both in number and in relation to other domains or fields of society, such as economy or politics). In this vein, routinization of religious authority is closely connected to the transformation of social forms from what Weber and Troeltsch used to call "sect" to "church" (Troeltsch 1925; Weber 1985). If we relate these considerations to the guiding questions in the introduction of this special issue (Kalender/El-Wereny/Nagel 2026), it could be hypothesized that routinization is reflected in i) a change of authority relationships from bilateral to multilateral settings with a higher degree of internal stratification, ii) a change of the instance of authority from personal to non-personal entities, iii) a change of the inner attitude demanding more coherence, but less proof, iv) a diversification of the degrees of allegiance (and maybe an overall sublimation?) or/and v) an increased significance of the structural context and external driving forces. Needless to say, these hypotheses are nothing but tentative and call for empirical investigation. Therefore, I will use the remaining section to explore applications to the domains of migration and mediatization.

4. Outlook: Routinization of religious authority under conditions of migration and mediatization

Instead of a theoretical conclusion, I would like to put the previous conceptual considerations on religious authority into practice and translate them into potential avenues for future research. In

doing so, I will concentrate on two focus areas of this special issue, namely migration and minority-majority constellations and mediatization.

With regard to migration and minority-majority constellations, at least four mechanisms of routinization come to mind, namely legal regulations, public discourse, intergenerational transmission, and minority tactics:

First, the routinization of religious authority may be driven by legal regulations of the receiving country. When religious communities are constituted as associations under private or public law, they need to adjust their internal authority structure to external norms of representation and decision making. In Germany, for instance, an association under private law needs a governing board, which usually consists of several persons in different functions, such as president, treasurer, or secretary. Furthermore, it requires a written statute and regular general meetings in order to (formally) ensure democratic decision-making. Authority change is likely to occur if and to the extent that there is a mismatch between external norms and internal authority structures: In a charismatic movement, for instance, it is easy to imagine the leader as president of the association. But who else is supposed to be on the board and based on which criteria? As the answer to this question renders the internal hierarchy visible and calls for its legitimation, it is the first step towards routinization. And while it is clear that formal structures can be hollowed out by informal practices (see paragraph on minority tactics below), the impact of these structures on the self-understanding of a group should not be underestimated.

Second, routinization can be driven by public discourses which carry normative notions of what a *proper* religion is and how it should be organized. Often, these notions take the long-standing religious majority as a role model. An example would be the emergence of historic-critical exegesis (HCE) as an implicit norm, e.g. in interfaith settings. Although it is rarely put on the agenda as topic, the understanding of HCE as a superior method of interpretation of religious scriptures has been pervasive in German interreligious dialogue groups. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore either the articulations of this norm or critical reactions by other participants. There are, however, at least two mechanisms how HCE as a guiding principle may foster routinization: On the one hand, the systematic and source-critical analysis of religious scriptures is closely associated with overall tendencies of rationalization and lends itself to a democratization of religious interpretation and may thus question charismatic or traditional forms of authority. On the other hand, HCE demands a high degree of learnedness and professionalization and therefore lends itself to exclusive forms of epistemic leadership and oligarchization.

Third, and more endogenous, authority change can be a result of intergenerational transmission. As we know since Thomas and Znaniecki's classic piece *The Polish Peasant*, immigrant communities are often marked by a separation of generational spaces of experience (Thomas/Znaniecki 1996; Bohnsack/Schäffer 2002): Processes of acculturation and social mobility may lead to an increasing separation of life worlds between the first and subsequent

generations. As a consequence, tensions and internal power struggles may arise that can result in different patterns of authority change: while actors from the first generation can claim authority based on seniority and the dignity of their pioneering work for their community, the younger members can build authoritative claims on their specific cultural capital, namely their command of the language or their effective knowledge of *how things work here*. In this constellation, we may see a pattern of shared authority as part of an incremental assumption of responsibility by the younger generations (Freudenberg 2026). However, a denial of participation may also lead to schisms along generational lines with the younger members founding new groups which are often more inclined to the country of arrival than to the country of origin. These developments become even more complicated if the generational layering intersects with new waves of immigration. This may result in the coexistence of two groups similar in age, but fundamentally different in their space of experience. While intergenerational tensions in religious immigrant groups and religious identity formation of younger generations have received significant scholarly attention (Hervieu-Léger 1998; Baumann/Nagel 2023: 114–124), there has so far been little empirical research on the internalization of authority knowledge through religious education, either within these groups (catechesis) or in family contexts.

Fourth, minorities are more susceptible to external pressures towards routinization (e.g., through legal regulation or public discourse, see above) and may therefore develop various tactics to preserve their own model of authority despite external expectations. Following de Certeau, minority tactics can be understood as an “art of the weak” to counterbalance hegemonic interventions (Certeau 1984: 37). From a neo-institutionalist perspective, there are three ideal typical modes to dissolve the tension between external and internal expectations: compliance, protest, and decoupling (Rosenow-Williams 2014). Compliance refers to a remodelling of structures according to external prescriptions. This will be particularly difficult for experienced minorities, i.e. groups which already were in a religious or ethnic minority position in the country of origin (like Yezidis, oriental Christians, or Ahmadiyya) and hence have a strong tendency to cultural and religious preservation. In contrast, protest refers to the rejection of external expectations and is likely to entail some sort of sanction, e.g., the denial of a legal status or the exclusion from an interfaith initiative. As a consequence, religious minorities may apply a tactic of decoupling which is marked by formal compliance and informal persistence. This pattern can be found throughout the history of religion as theological concepts like *Taqiyya* or *Kitmān* indicate. Both notions stand for a tactic of hiding one’s own religious belief and practice in order to avoid hostility by the religious majority (Sökefeld 2014: 234–235; Wettich 2019: 164–165). Based on the theoretical discussion of routinization above, however, it seems likely that decoupling (similar to charismatic rule) is not sustainable, but will eventually turn into compliance (or protest).

With regard to routinization under conditions of mediatization, two mechanisms of religious authority change come to mind, namely i) the role of technical infrastructures in streamlining (and hiding) authority structures and ii) the emergence of new forms of epistemic leadership in

digital religious counselling as well as the revival of charismatic authority through social media and digital content creators (influencers).

First, research on digital religion has come to highlight the interplay of religious change and technical infrastructures (Bunt 2018: 19–33). Even though digitalization is often associated with a de-hierarchization of social interaction, there is significant differentiation in terms of role structure and range. While it is still quite visible and explicit in online discussion boards (e.g., the distinction between administrators, moderators and redditors in Reddit), this differentiation is much more subtle or even secret in other platforms, such as TikTok, as it can be embedded in algorithms not open to the public. Circling back to the Sociology of Knowledge, the embeddedness of authority in technical infrastructure constitutes a highly objectified form of authority knowledge as the authority structure presents itself as a given without any further need of legitimation. Apart from this diversification of authoritative roles, we see another process of social differentiation in the formation of bubbles based on similar interests and attitudes of the audience. In the terminology of Zald and Ash, digitalization therefore lends itself to a new form of schismogenesis as it fosters the establishment of distinct social spaces based on ideological divides.

Second, mediatization can give rise to new forms of religious counselling and epistemic leadership. As the emerging debate on cyber-Islamic environments (Bunt 2018) shows, digital forms of religious counselling and self-assurance have strong repercussions with religious authority change. As Mehmet Kalender (2026), Anna Neumaier (2026) and Laura Haddad (2026) demonstrate, social media promotes digital content creators as a new type of charismatic leader. And the article by El-Wereny (2026) illustrates how online fatwa portals give rise to the religious self-determination of laypeople and a new class of epistemic leaders at the same time. In these cases, authority change is not a result of the technical infrastructure as such, but of changing interaction patterns driven by technology: In this regard, online fatwas lower the threshold and transaction costs to obtain religious counsel and thus enable a democratization of religious knowledge and discourse, but also introduce a new need for quality assurance (Rimestad 2026). Likewise, influencers can only sustain their charisma as exemplary prophets to the extent that they portray themselves as authentic and relatable.

It was my goal in this article to gain a better understanding of religious authority change by revisiting classic debates on routinization, oligarchization and institutionalization. Even though these debates have many intersections and commonalities, such as their general interest in a conservative pattern of authority change, they highlight different aspects. Hence, one outcome of this article is to widen the semantic field of routinization and to delineate distinct dimensions such as structural stabilization (through iteration, habitualization and oligarchization), professionalization (in the sense of an increasing division of labour and the extension of full-time staff) and expansion (in size and in relation to other domains of society). A second outcome is linked to continuity and change of religious authority: whereas concepts of routinization are well-equipped to explain the persistence of religious institutions, their teleological perspective makes

it hard to conceptualize transformation and innovation. As a consequence, routinization cannot be understood without a progressive strand of authority change as its counterpart. This is reflected in Stark's emphasis on the periodical re-awakening of charisma or in the focus by Zald and Ash on schismogenesis as a social expression of religious and political innovation.

And last, but not least, a third outcome could be a more nuanced notion of the internal and external driving forces of routinization: even though a momentum towards routinization may be an integral part of all social forms, it cannot be separated from external factors, such as economic conditions, minority-majority constellations and media change.

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