

DISSERTATION PROJECT – Sarah Pieslinger

Doctoral programme in religious studies

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Working title

The significance of “spiritual influencers” in the context of societal, religious and spiritual transformation processes: A religious studies perspective based on the example of David Steindl-Rast and Ayya Khema

(1) RELEVANCE OF THE TOPIC

Western societies are confronted with a number of societal transformation processes (macro level) such as individualisation, de-institutionalisation, globalisation, marketisation, economisation, secularisation and many others. These lead to changes in religious and spiritual self-understandings and practices (micro level), to a different definition of the relationship between religion and spirituality, and to a transformation of religious social forms (meso level). In addition to secularisation and pluralisation, processes of de-traditionalisation are leading to a growing questioning of religious authorities and rules. Economisation and marketisation increase the importance of a market for spiritual services. Belonging to a particular religious tradition increasingly becomes a conscious decision and a question of lifestyle.¹ This increases the relevance of religious and spiritual (auto)biographies both at the societal level, where they function as orientation variables and identity markers, and at the (religious) academic level, insofar as spiritual life stories can be an approach to better understand shifts in meaning in the field of contemporary spirituality. So-called “spiritual influencers” are an example of orienting markers within the changing spiritual and religious field.

The dissertation project examines the relevance of “spiritual influencers” in the context of societal, religious and spiritual transformation processes in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

¹ See Ludwig/Heiser 2014; Woodhead/Gauthier/Cornelio 2021; Baier 2006: 11-48.

Using the example of David Steindl-Rast² and Ayya Khema³, it investigates the relevance of the networks and circles of disciples of spiritual influencers for contemporary social forms of religion.

(2) STATE OF THE ART

There are two main areas of research in this field: one that focuses on the meso level and one that addresses the micro level. The meso level focuses on the relationship between religion, spirituality and modern society, or contemporary spirituality. The place of religious communities and the transmission of religious and spiritual knowledge in the context of modernity are increasingly being questioned: Markus Hero (2010) asks what religious life can look like today and Hubert Knoblauch (2009) puts the concept of “popular religion” up for discussion. Further theoretical approaches are Thomas Luckmann’s reflections on “invisible religion” (1996), which Christoph Bochinger, Martin Engelbrecht and Winfried Gebhardt (2009) take up in order to investigate the relevance of forms of spiritual orientation in more detail. With the concept of “Spiritueller Wanderer”, Gebhardt focuses on a type of postmodern religiosity.⁴ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead research the relationship between religion and spirituality and their place in contemporary culture in their study “The Spiritual Revolution” (2001). Especially in the current socio-cultural context, a “person-centred” or a “subjectivity-centred”⁵ direction has emerged.

² Steindl-Rast (born Franz Kuno in Vienna in 1926) grew up in a traditional Catholic milieu near Vienna and attended the Neulandschule (founded by a Catholic youth movement). During his school years, the Second World War began and he was drafted into military service. During this time faith became a source of hope for him. After the war, he felt great gratitude and tried to suppress his vocation to the monastic life. Steindl-Rast went to the USA in 1952 because he was looking for a monastery that was strongly oriented towards the Rule of St. Benedict. He entered the Benedictine reform monastery Mount Saviour. It was during this time that the first fundamental changes in his religious and spiritual development took place. He became intensively acquainted with Benedictine spirituality and way of life, choral prayer, the Benedictine principle of “pray and work” and became sensitised to the human relationship to time. He learned what it means to live in the NOW. The second milestone was the encounter with the Buddhist monk Eido Roshi in the mid-1960s, through which Steindl-Rast became more familiar with the Buddhist practices. This time strongly influenced his interreligious interest and he founded the Center for Spiritual Studies in New York, which became an important place of interreligious exchange and interreligious learning (see Steindl-Rast 2016). His interest in other religions and cultures as well as his broad lecture activities have taken him to many different countries.

³ Ayya Khema (born in Berlin in 1923, died in Allgäu in 1997) grew up in Berlin in a very prosperous Jewish family, whereby her parents can be described as assimilated Jews. In her autobiography, she describes her life journey as an outer and inner journey. Through the latter, she succeeded in making peace with her past and returning to her homeland, Germany, which she had to leave at a young age because of her Jewish identity and Nazi persecution. First, her flight from Germany took her to Scotland, Shanghai and America, and finally her search for the deeper dimension of human existence took her to Mexico, Central and South America, Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka, where her inner journey ended and she was ordained as a Buddhist nun. In her spiritual search, she first became intensively involved with Jewish spirituality but did not find a deeper connection. Through encounters with other spiritual personalities such as the Indian guru Ramana Maharshi, the ashram of Sri Aurobindo or Nyanaponika she found her way to Theravada Buddhism. She was substantially involved in the spread of Buddhism in the West, and in the spring of 1989, she founded the Buddha-Haus in Allgäu, the Metta Vihara and meditation centres in Stuttgart and Munich. She has numerous students who practise meditation according to her example (see Khema 1997).

⁴ See Gebhardt 2005.

⁵ Heelas/Woodhead 2005: 5.

This is followed by the second major strand of research, which is concerned with the level of the individual (micro level): there is an increased interest in biographies because the differentiation of society means that obligations and orientation variables are becoming fewer and, as a result, the importance of role models in the search for one's own identity is increasing.⁶ The religious scholar Brooke Schedneck also advocates a biographical-analytical approach and asks in her approach to what extent biographies have an influence on the development of Buddhism and what significance the passing on of personal experiences has in the spread of modern Buddhist trends.⁷ But autobiographies are also becoming increasingly important in the study of spirituality.⁸ In recent years, biographical research has not only gained in importance as a methodological discipline,⁹ but it is also increasingly being used within the research field of religion and biography.¹⁰ In particular, biographical case reconstructions from a social science perspective aim to better understand the interaction between the individual and society.¹¹ In theological and religious studies, biographical research on spiritual and religious personalities is a particular area of research. Here, however, it is primarily a matter of individual case studies that hardly go into more detail about the location in the broader thematic area of contemporary spirituality or take a look at the concrete influence of these persons. Biographies with an interreligious orientation are particularly relevant for the research context of this work: for example, Raimon Panikar¹², Henri Le Saux¹³ or Thomas Merton¹⁴.

(3) AIM OF THE PROJECT & INNOVATIVE CHARACTER

Most previous research has concentrated on one of these two levels (meso level or micro level) and overlooked the connection between them. This research gap will be filled by asking about the relevance of individual biographical development on a spiritual level for their broader social effectiveness and their role teachers. The project addresses the following main research question

What is the significance of "spiritual influencers" in the context of societal, religious and spiritual transformation processes in Germany, Austria and Switzerland?

⁶ See Mandl-Schmidt 2003: 18.

⁷ See Schedneck 2007: 58.

⁸ See Ondrasek 2017.

⁹ See Lutz/Schiebel/Tuider 2018; Alber/Griese/Schiebel 2018.

¹⁰ See Wohlrab-Sahr/Frank 2018: 409–460.

¹¹ See Fischer 2019: 19.

¹² See Hackbarth-Johnson/Winkler 2021.

¹³ See Hackbarth-Johnson 2016.

¹⁴ See Mandl-Schmidt 2003.

- How did the Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast and the Buddhist nun Ayya Khema become “spiritual influencers”? (Sub-question 1)
- What biographical experiences have had a transformative effect on their spirituality and religious identity? (Sub-question 2)
- Which biographical characteristics and which content-related themes of their spirituality are central to their broad public effectiveness? (Sub-question 3)

The aim of the dissertation is to link the societal and individual level by investigating the significance of "spiritual influencers" in the context of societal, religious and spiritual transformation processes in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.¹⁵ A better understanding of the current complex discourse in the field of religion and spirituality can be achieved by including socio-cultural transformation processes as a basic reference for the formation of spiritual and religious identity. The aim is to develop a metatheoretical framework to identify the different stages of the process of influencing and, in a second step, to ask what role spiritual influencers play in the transfer of religious traditions.

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¹⁵ The research approach is based on an empirical qualitative approach. Depending on the research question and interest, the research design was individually adapted. A number of methods (e.g. media resonance analysis, biographical analysis, situation analysis, ...) were used.

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