

Religiöse Vielfalt, Sozialkapital und gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt

Religionsmonitor
verstehen was verbindet

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Abstract

American political scientists Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell (2010) cited the “Aunt Susan principle” as an explanation of how people in the USA deal successfully with religious diversity in society. We all have an Aunt Susan in our lives: a person whom we perceive as “saintly”, but who belongs to a different religion (or none at all) and thus has different beliefs from our own. There is no doubt that Aunt Susan is destined for heaven — but if she is going to heaven, then so might other people who share her religion (or who have none). Put another way, people’s social capital is capable of building religious bridges and increasing their acceptance of religious diversity, thus facilitating social cohesion in a pluralistic religious society.

Over the past decades, immigration and secularisation processes have brought about a new religious pluralism in Germany which presents a number of social and political challenges. And in Germany as elsewhere, success in mastering these challenges depends on how well people deal with their own and other people’s religiosity in their daily lives and social relationships. The 2013 Religion Monitor presents new data that makes it possible for the first time to gain insights into religiosity and the religious diversity of social networks and allows the study of the bridging effects of

social capital in Germany and abroad. The core findings of the present study may be summed up as follows:

1.

Religion and religiosity are everyday components of social life in Germany. The subject of religion comes up for discussion in social relationships, so that most people know about the religiosity of those around them. What is more, the overwhelming majority of Germans have regular contact with at least a few people who are religious. This is true not only of the older generations, but of all age groups. In fact, Germany ranks together with Spain, Turkey, and the USA in having the most religious social relationships of all the eleven countries in the study. This finding, however, should not obscure the fact that most social contacts in Germany are “secular” and may differ significantly depending on the individual’s sphere of life and, above all, place of residence. Thus family networks are significantly more religious than contacts at the workplace. Additionally, there are significant differences between western and eastern Germany and between urban and rural areas. The effect of geographical environments on religious social contacts is stronger in Germany than in any other country.

2.

For most Germans, religious diversity is part of their everyday lives. Inter-religious social contacts at the workplace, in the neighbourhood, and especially during personal leisure time are now considered “normal”. This finding reflects the social reality of the new religious pluralism in Germany and is not contradicted by the fact that, in general, people tend to prefer like-minded people in religious as in other matters, or by the fact that families in particular tend to share the same religious faith. While it is true that inter-religious contacts may be more frequent in other societies than in Germany, the German situation is almost exactly what one would expect given the country’s religious composition. The extent and frequency of contact with members of other religions is largely dependent on opportunity. Thus residential location is an important factor in inter-religious contacts; bridging social contacts to other religions are more frequent in the “old” western parts and in urban areas than in eastern Germany and rural areas. Assuming that religious pluralism in Germany continues to grow, and given the fact that the younger generations already have more contact with members of other religions, inter-religious bridging social capital is likely to increase still further in the future.

3.

The social living contexts of the family, the neighbourhood, leisure time, and place of work or training are generally very similar in their religious composition and have roughly the same proportions of religious people and members of other religions.

People from religious families also tend to have more contact with religious people in their neighbourhood and leisure contexts and, to a lesser extent, at the workplace as well. Similarly, people who have members of other religions among their families and relatives also have more inter-religious contacts in their neighbourhoods, leisure activities and workplaces. The religious social networks frequented by these people are more homogeneous faith environments, although this does not mean that people in Germany (still) live in rigid, religiously uniform milieus that encompass all their life contexts. Rather, connections between the different social areas are weak or average in this country compared to other societies, so that it can be assumed that most people live in balanced lifeworlds. There is also no sign of compensatory behaviour patterns whereby people confronted with unwelcome contacts in social contexts that are secular or characterised by high religious diversity might be attempting to compensate by withdrawing into (homogeneous) religious family or leisure contexts.

4.

It is difficult to assess how people's values and attitudes correlate with specific types of religious networks. There are very few statistically sound correlations, and those that can be identified suggest that bridging religious social capital promotes or presupposes different values in different social contexts. While, for instance, religious family structures tend to correlate in Germany with traditional values, the same thing is not necessarily true of religious networks in leisure, neighbourhood, and workplace contexts. It is therefore difficult to make recommendations about the values that should be promoted among the population in order to encourage the formation of inter-religious contacts. It is probably social opportunities rather than individual preferences that play a crucial role here.

5.

To date, any fears that processes of social change such as globalisation and immigration may have a negative impact on social cohesion appear to be unfounded – at least to the extent that it is possible to assess the issue. Neither of the two social factors is connected to the religious composition of social networks to any appreciable extent. Additionally, it is precisely immigrants and members of religious minorities who have the most intensive inter-religious contacts and significant bridging social capital. Among the social attributes examined here, none is as significant for inter-religious contacts in Germany as migrant status and membership of a religious minority. This phenomenon emerges particularly clearly when one compares Germany with other countries, where this pattern is generally less well defined. This finding, which contradicts the occasionally expressed fear of parallel religious societies in Germany, can once again be explained by the opportunity structures available to the people in question. As minorities, by definition, represent a small proportion of the overall population, they are inevitably compelled to interact

with members of the religious (or non-religious) majority in their day-to-day social encounters. This is not to trivialise or deny the problems that occur in certain situations. However, it would be inappropriate to promote an alarmist attitude that presents Germany's new religious pluralism primarily as a threat to social cooperation.

6.

In general, the better a country's economic performance and the more equal the distribution of income among the population, the greater its bridging religious social capital and the more intense the inter-religious contacts in the population. The religious composition of social networks and social cohesion are crucially dependent on the economic situation and the distribution of economic resources in society. When the economy is poor and economic inequality is increasing, the distance between religious groups increases as well and there is a decline in religious bridging social capital. This relationship between the economy and inter-religious contacts applies primarily to society as a whole, but less so to individuals, since higher socio-economic status does not correlate with increased social contact with members of other religions in Germany; in fact, the opposite may be the case. However, economic prosperity and equality do not result in greater inter-religious acceptance. Rather, they have a secularising effect on the religious composition of social networks. To the extent that existential insecurity is lessened, the religious character of social relationships decreases and the social significance of religion declines. Conversely, it cannot be ruled out that, should an economic crisis occur at some future time, religious networks will recover their relevance and become an important form of social capital.

7.

Finally, religious bridging social capital is related to socially desirable attitudes such as religious tolerance and acceptance

of religious diversity. Contrary to what social capital theory would suggest, there is no evidence that either networks with a heterogeneous religious composition or frequent contact with religious people in the family and the neighbourhood, at work, and in the course of leisure activities have the effect of increasing social trust (both trust in other people in general and trust in members of one's own religious group). However, in societies characterised by religious heterogeneity, it may be the case that mutual religious tolerance and acceptance of diversity promotes social cohesion more effectively than a trust based on similarities and a strong consensus about values. Although the different spheres of life influence cohesion in different ways and the question of causality must remain open, religious bridging social capital nevertheless goes hand in hand with lower degrees of religious exclusivity, greater openness towards different religious beliefs, and a more positive attitude to religious diversity. Thus religious bridging social capital contributes significantly to social cohesion in religiously pluralistic societies.