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Book Review
Anna Neumaier, religion@home? Religionsbezogene Online-Plattformen und ihre Nutzung

Eine Untersuchung zu neuen Formen gegenwärtiger Religiosität, Würzburg: Ergon 2016, 478 pages, ISBN: 978-3-95650-141-8

In her dense and extensive book, Anna Neumaier examines new forms of contemporary religiosity in German-speaking Christian online forums and asks about the conditions, forms and consequences of religious Internet usage. On one hand, she examines forms of religiosity, the media properties that characterize communication and social exchange in online forums as well as the topics discussed and emerging forms of socialization. On the other hand, she analyzes the relation of all that to contemporary religiosity as a whole. Following a suggestion made by Mia Lövheim, Neumaier provides an innovative comparison of online forums and alternative offline offerings in order to bring to light similarities and differences between "different places of religious exchange" (18). Neumaier's investigation is located in the research context of the study of transformations of media and religion and deals in particular with questions of thresholds and flexibility, individualization and communitization, visibility and invisibility, and public and private spheres for religion and religiosity. Thus, the author examines and links three research fields: systematic consideration of religious online offers, investigation of the connections between online and offline religious offerings and usage, and general theories on contemporary religious transformation.

The methodological basis of the survey is presented in the second chapter and follows the principles of grounded theory. The research subjects were 20 online discussion forums, which were analyzed with regard to content and media characteristics. These forums were used to contact and select interview partners, resulting in 34 qualitative interviews, 23 of which were evaluated; Neumaier also undertook a quantitative survey among forum users. The third chapter discusses continuities and discontinuities in the interaction of religion, society and media, as well as the relevance of research on religion on the Internet. The fourth chapter addresses the Internet and, in particular, religious online forums as the concrete field of study, with the main results from the empirical investigation introduced.

Chapter five expounds the results from analysis of interviewees' introductory narratives. The first question posed to interviewees was: "How and in what circumstances did you come to the forum, and why are you still there?" (211). Based on analysis of the narratives, the author elaborates seven categories of answer, which are sketched and discussed: (1) narrative of the user's general technological, biographical and religious contexts; (2) narrative of specific triggers that caused the user to enter the forum; (3) description of the specific entry into the forum; (4) description of first impressions; (5) summary narrative of different phases of intensity of participation; (6) reviews of the forums; (7) self-descriptions and arguments regarding specifics of usage.

Chapter six discusses classical and modern theories and approaches to social forms, in particular those conceptualized as community, group and network. On the basis of her empirical findings, Neumaier outlines the reasons for her preference for the community concept and identifies three ideal types (in the Weberian sense of the term) of community – "faith-siblings", "forum family" and "conflict arena". While the "faith-siblings" pattern is characterized by the correlation of the users' search for like-minded people with reference to an overarching Christian community, the communicative exchange in the mode of the "forum family" is characterized in particular by cohesion and clearer boundaries: in a strict sense, only members of the "family" are users of the forum. The third pattern, the "conflict arena", is characterized by playful competition in the users' interactions, a form of community deemed "post-traditional" (as conceptualized by Ronald Hitzler) and "fluid" (as conceptualized by Dorothea Lueddeckens), since it is temporary, with affiliation oriented to individual interests, and consequently "potentially precarious" (325). Thus, according to the author, the social forms observed in the forums range from classic social concepts (Max Weber and Ferdinand Tönnies) to modern conceptions like that of the post-traditional community. One principal outcome of the study is its highlighting of the close connection between the religious affiliation of users, the importance of social interactions to them, and the role of religion in the context of Internet use and community formation. In particular, Neumaier shows that the religious imprinting of users (i.e., their socialization outside the online forums) influences the community-based interpretation of online forums.

The seventh chapter focuses on the users' narratives in order to identify and discuss their biographical and motivational embedding. The author presents the results of the empirical analysis in the form of four ideal-type models of usage. All narratives emphasize the inadequacies and dysfunctionalities of religious offline offerings (primarily of churches and local religious communities) as central reasons for online usage, and the author therefore defines these

explanations as deficit-narratives (in German, *Mangelerzählungen*). Primarily decisive are not the characteristics of the online forums, but the problems of the offline offerings. The users criticize or complain about (a) the incompatibility with the demands of modern life and work of participation modalities in religious institutions and organizations, (b) individual negative experiences with hometown religious communities and/or churches, (c) lack of space for religious exchange and increasing "levels of organization of the churches" (352) and (d) the lack of religious expertise. Finally, Neumaier describes the general tabooization of religion as a fifth, all-embracing deficit-narrative, with reference not to local religious communities or churches, but to the interviewees' non-religious environment.

In the eighth chapter, the deficit-narratives are subsumed under the axis, or key category, of "destabilization", which is intended to serve as a common explanation. This category is a product of actual conditions, especially the well-known dissatisfaction with offline offerings. Online usage is therefore conceptualized as a "strategy of homeostasis" or re-stabilization: "Existing convictions are to be secured against imminent uncertainty or restored in the face of a destabilization already in progress" (415). Two interesting results can be highlighted here. First, Neumaier observes that, despite time-consuming and dedicated use of online forums, the "shift" in faith orientation of users is only small: online forums are in large part used to restore, stabilize or deepen existing beliefs. Secondly, despite intensive and regular exchange with other users, the individual's faith remains largely a private matter: "Religious convictions are now in the innermost of the individual … Communities, forums, and the family can serve to a varying extent as a place of exchange on religion-related issues, but the influence of this exchange on individual religiosity is classified as marginal – religion is restabilized, not transformed" (420).

In the ninth, and final, chapter, Neumaier relates the results of the empirical analysis to the broader theoretical investigative concept. First, she highlights that the use of online forums leads not to increasingly fluid contacts, but, on the contrary, to more long-term and stable interactions (exceptions can be found partly in the exchange mode characterized as the "conflict arena"). Second, she points out that as a new social space the Internet challenges current ways of conceptualizing the private/public dichotomy. In fact, Neumaier observes that even in areas which are normally understood as belonging to the private sphere, such as family and partnership, the possibility for exchange about religion and of religious communication is perceived as deficient; online forums serve as a spatial substitute. Third, with regard to the distinction between visibility and invisibility, she observes that whereas the fundamental visibility of online exchange is beneficial for those users who want to spread their

convictions, forums are not used as a place for intimate concerns. Thus, the visibility of the exchange makes the subject-related religious exchange more difficult. At the same time, however, knowledgeable exchange about religion tendentially detached from individual convictions and experiences is stimulated. Fourth, Neumaier shows that the online forums not only can be described as a social network, but also fulfill characteristics of communities, inasmuch as she observes the presence of shared practices, values and a sense of togetherness/belonging. Finally, Neumaier again points out that the central and decisive reason, given by the users themselves, for turning to online forums is the lack of exchange possibilities in offline spaces, primarily in local religious communities and churches. Finally, she emphasizes that the Internet is a place for stabilizing restoration but does not lead to fundamental changes and transformations of religious convictions.

One of the great merits of Anna Neumaier's study is the finding that online forums should not be understood as separate spaces for religious communication and/or exchange about religion, but forms an interdependent relationship with other, more "traditional", social spaces. By means of a consistent and stringent interweaving of theory and empirical work, she elaborates categories and questions which will surely be very fruitful for further investigation of religious interactions and communication in online forums and generally on the Internet. Perhaps the only shortcoming of the study is that one rarely gets an insight into the concrete topics that are discussed and dealt with within the forums. Although study of the actual communication and language forms referring to specific problems, facts, emotions and events is not one of the declared goals of the investigation, its inclusion might have led to an expansion of the research horizon, allowing the question of the transformation of religion to be reshaped. We might speculate that the transformation of religion does not take place mainly at the level of the beliefs and convictions expressed by users, but rather at the level of language, in semantic and rhetorical patterns. It could be extremely fruitful to examine how certain political, cultural, social and economic events or developments are reflected and represented in online forums. A further interesting question would be whether semantic and rhetorical patterns in online forums differ from those used in communication in other social spaces, and, if so, how and why. But perhaps one of the many merits of Neumaier's study lies precisely in its having created space for such questions. Because the author convincingly demonstrates that use of online forums is equivalent to a "backward movement in the restoration of stable religiosity" (438), the question of the transformation of religion is shifted away from the domain of the subject and the subject's attitude and toward the domain of language and religious forms of representation.