

MIGRATION CAN BE REGARDED AS THE GREATEST FORCE OF CHANGE IN RELIGION



JProf. Dr. Bernhard Spielberg, Anna-Maria Müller, Simon Ruscher and Franziska Seidler

The rise in global mobility is also having a noticeable effect on the Catholic Church. On the one hand, the number of members is growing at a rapid pace. On the other, since the start of the 20th century, the redistribution of members worldwide has prompted a shift in thoughts and practices from those of a Eurocentric religious institution to those of a polycentric global church. In order to shed light on this process of radical transformation, the FRIAS junior researcher group led by Junior Fellow JProf. Dr Bernhard Spielberg is examining changes in Catholicism in a global perspective. Since autumn 2015, Spielberg, together with the doctoral students Anna-Maria Müller, Simon Ruscher and Franziska Seidler, has been researching the challenges and opportunities that global developments have created for the Catholic Church.

FRIAS: Professor Spielberg, your research project is called *Global Transformations of Catholicism*. What are the issues your group is examining?

Bernhard Spielberg: We are investigating the impact of globalisation on the Catholic Church. With cathedrals and churches located around the world from New York to Tokyo, the institution has long seen itself as a global church. What is interesting, however, is that it is only in the last fifty years or so that the non-European churches have begun to attract attention as bodies in their own right. As it has become clear that local churches are capable of independent thought as opposed to simply being extensions of Europe, the tide has finally begun to turn. This ongoing transition within the church is a reflection of current global developments, as the increasing sovereignty of other parts of the world is leading to a relativisation of traditional European patterns of thought.

Our research centres on three basic elements shaping the identity of the church. We are looking into how the role of the priest, the organisational structure of communities and the idea of God have changed. To examine these three fundamental questions, we are focusing on three continents: Asia, North America and Africa. Although these changes are, of course, apparent in other locations, it is here that they become especially clear. While the role of the priest is transforming just as fundamentally in North America as it is in Africa, the latter is a very special setting for observing these transitions. The same can be said for the perception of God in India and the development of communities in the USA, which comprise – officially and in practice – a wide range of ethnic groups and members with different cultural backgrounds. By concentrating on these aspects, we have attempted to break down the very broad topic of global transformation into three small projects. While each of us is initially working on our own project, we share a common point of departure and will ultimately draw conclusions describing matters in a global perspective.

FRIAS: That fits in nicely with the title of this issue: “Mobility across Borders”. You yourselves are moving around and examining developments within the church on three different continents. And, beyond this, you are looking at the impact of global mobility on Catholicism. How would you describe the changes from a theological perspective?

Bernhard Spielberg: I think that the increasing interaction between people is challenging our understanding of our own local theology. Unlike other disciplines, theology is still a field in which important publications continue to be released in German. However, a downside of this is that German researchers do not necessarily notice when significant and sweeping changes get underway in other countries. Newspaper readers often act in a similar way. There is a tendency for people only to be interested in affairs affecting their own country, nevertheless they believe that the same solutions can work all over the world. It is this attitude towards solutions which we wish to address.

We are already observing how the increasing sovereignty of church communities outside of Europe is resulting in the renegotiation of traditional organisational structures. This transition process pervades all religious institutions all the way up to the highest echelons of the church. Ten years ago, the pope still determined with complete sovereignty how Catholicism should be interpreted – everything he said was binding and set the direction in which the church had to go. Today, however, even the pope is seen interacting more with others and this certainly has the potential to cause conflict. In light of these developments, the function of the pope is changing as well. There is a long-term trend – both within the church and society as a whole – towards a greater tolerance of the co-existence of multiple cultures accompanied by productive engagement with this diversity.

Simon Ruscher: In Europe, the secularisation theory, which is the assumption that modernisation, individualisation and rationalisation are causing religion to become less important over time, was upheld for many years. However, on taking a close look at the people migrating into the European Union and the countries they are moving from, it becomes apparent that the majority of migrants come from Christian areas, a phenomenon which is radically altering Christianity in Europe. In the USA, we can observe that white, Caucasian Catholics are actually decreasing rapidly, the proportion of Catholics falling into this group having dropped from almost 80% to 40% since 1995. The remaining members are from Asia and South America. It goes without saying that this has led to a wide range of developments in all areas of religious life. Migration can therefore be regarded as the greatest force of change in religion. Migration puts certain theologies into a different context, allowing us to pursue alternative ways of life and find new places of refuge. How, for instance, has it come to pass that there are Buddhist monasteries in the Black Forest in which, interestingly, a rather homogenous group of middle-class Germans practise Buddhism? Or that there are mosques in Switzerland which are largely attended by converts and stand directly alongside mosques which are only attended by migrants? This demonstrates that although we need to take the secularisation theory seriously, in a wider context, it is clear that religion is changing more quickly than ever before and a radical transformation is underway. This is because religion is



not just growing in proportion with the population, but in fact at a disproportionate rate. Incidentally, this is the case for virtually every religion apart from Judaism.

FRIAS: So it could be said that globalisation is taking place within the church as well. What exactly are the changes you are noticing?

Franziska Seidler: Whenever we examine transformations in the Catholic Church, we are automatically observing the transformation of society at large as well. This is because developments within the church ultimately go hand in hand with social flux. Changes in the role of the priest do not happen on their own in isolation from external circumstances, but rather take place alongside shifts in society. This also applies to how God is perceived. For example, how I think about God is heavily influenced by where I live and how my environment is changing. Since our research is inextricably linked to these social situations, we are only able to gain a proper understanding of changes within the church if we consider these factors as well.

Bernhard Spielberg: Examining various global religious communities also gives us the opportunity to gain an understanding of how diverse social changes are having an impact on Catholic theology. For example, the treatment of divorce and homosexuality is viewed completely differently

in Western Europe than in Eastern Europe or Africa. In these latter parts of the world, people resolutely oppose the church giving its blessing to homosexual relationships. While these conflicting points of view were once of little consequence, the media and the increasing ways in which people can share their opinions with one another mean they are now of growing relevance.

Anna-Maria Müller: In fact, the global nature of our research allows us to perceive these divisions with utmost clarity. Until now, global theological paradigms were largely shaped by European perspectives. However, the rebalancing taking place within the church now begs the question of what would happen, for instance, if the African episcopal conferences were to rewrite the image of family, for example by integrating polygamy into their interpretation of Catholicism? This would presumably cause an outcry. However, the cultural practice of polygamy is just as normal in Africa as divorce is in Western Europe. Our research is therefore giving us an insight into what it means to live in a specific environment and to perceive certain

concepts as the norm. It also demonstrates how it is wrong to assume that these concepts can be applied universally; in reality, our attitude to life all comes down to context.

FRIAS: Ultimately, research into global mobility reveals local differences in how people lead their everyday lives beyond religious matters. Do you think that religion can help with integration in this regard?

Bernhard Spielberg: From studying the history of religion, we know that religion not only has the potential to foster conciliation, but also to incite violence. When we consider all these factors together, it becomes clear that they create a hugely complex set of circumstances which we are seeking to comprehend. For the purposes of our research, it is therefore helpful to gain an understanding of which of these potentials is developing during this period of transition and in which form. This may initially sound somewhat abstract, but, in actual fact, numerous culturally or religiously motivated debates are taking place in the 21st century within religious communities and between different cultures. For example, Germany is currently debating how to deal with migration and the resulting new cultural and religious influences.

The cultural and economic globalisation underway today is creating new uncertainties which are instill-

ing fear in some people. Here, faith can create stability and ultimately build trust. In this context, faith not only refers to affiliation with a certain set of beliefs, but a way of life which breeds the opposite of fear – in other words, trust. This is why religion is especially important during times of uncertainty because it provides us with ways of dealing with things that are unfamiliar to us. Biblical stories show us how to approach the unfamiliar, because God is always depicted as the outsider who, above all, stands beside those who are kind to strangers. The possibility of building trusting relationships is the greatest teaching which we can derive from religion today.

*FRIAS: Thank you for taking the time to talk to us.
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