

Expertise on NRMs in Switzerland: An Interstitial Space between the Religious and Scientific Fields

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1 Introduction

This chapter combines a historical case study on the construction of "expertise" on new religious movements (NRMs) in Switzerland from the 1960s to the early 1980s with a sociological analysis of the religious and scientific fields.¹ In contrast to the anglophone world (Ashcraft 2018), a well-defined and substantial community of scholars researching NRMs has never emerged in Switzerland, and, as a consequence, the field of NRM studies has never been accommodated at Swiss universities. However, a number of individuals and institutions have claimed expertise on the topic. Significantly, many of them were located at the intersection of the religious and scientific fields.

This chapter takes selected experts and expert groups on NRMs in Switzerland as examples to discuss a broader theoretical question about the articulation between the religious and scientific fields. More specifically, I will ask: How can we fruitfully conceptualize spaces in which two or more fields interfere with one another? And what role does social change play in the emergence of zones where distinct fields overlap? My overall argument ties in with longstanding observations about the social and religious transformations of the Long Sixties, especially the shift in values, the emergence of new forms of religiosity, and the loss of authority on the part of the mainstream Churches in Western societies. My contribution, however, does not focus on these changes directly, but rather on the actors who observed alternative religion in society and who claimed expertise on religion in the public sphere. At this meta-level, not only the religious field but also the scientific field come under scrutiny.

On a theoretical level, my analysis draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social fields. This framework is grounded in one of the most consequential sociological insights of the 20th century: In the wake of industrialization and modernization, Western societies went through a process of differentiation that resulted in the establishment of autonomous social fields, or systems, such as science, religion, and politics. For some time now, sociologists and scholars of religion have started to challenge differentiation theories, either by questioning their fundamental assumptions or by pointing out countertrends of entanglement or dedifferentiation. Bourdieu's field theory has also been the target of such critiques. In particular, contemporary sociologists and scholars of religion (e.g.,

¹ The results presented here are part of my PhD project "*Emerging religiosity, emerging assessments*," which is supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Verter 2003; Eyal 2013) criticize Bourdieu for insufficiently explaining how different social fields relate to one another. Although I agree with their general assessment, I will show that Bourdieu's work does in fact offer some interesting—albeit implicit—resources for thinking about the relations between fields. Thus, the case study presented in this chapter will not only fill a research gap in the history of expertise on NRMs in Switzerland, but it will contribute to the ongoing theoretical debate on social (de-)differentiation.

The chapter is structured as follows: First, I will introduce selected core concepts of field theory, focusing on the question of how different social fields relate to one another in the work of Bourdieu. Then, I will briefly introduce my definition of NRMs and expertise on NRMs. In the same section, I will contextualize the emergence of NRMs and the consequent reactions of various interest groups in Western countries. In the main part of the chapter, I will first show how expertise on NRMs in Switzerland emerged during the Long Sixties. I will elaborate the conceptual grounds on which Protestant and Catholic theologians first claimed expertise on alternative religions. Moving forward to the late 1970s and early 1980s, I will describe the foundation of an Ecumenical Working Group on New Religious Movements in Switzerland (EWG) as a telling example of a space in between the religious and scientific fields. In doing so, I will pay particular attention to the actors involved in the EWG, its institutional preconditions, as well as the discourses and practices promoted by its members. Drawing on empirical data, I will then discuss the suitability of Bourdieu's field-theoretical concepts to explain the relation between social fields and elaborate on the promising concept of "interstitial space" as a means to overcome some shortcomings of Bourdieu's approach. I will also argue that social change influences the emergence and disappearance of social spaces between fields. In the conclusion, I will summarize my findings and call attention to further research desiderata.

2 Bourdieu on the Relations between Social Fields

Inspired by works of organizational and economic sociology as well as by the oeuvre of Pierre Bourdieu, field theory has boomed in the social sciences since the beginning of the 21st century (Bernhard and Schmidt-Wellenburg 2012, 9). However, despite abundant interdisciplinary reflection, the study of religion has been rather hesitant in adopting and adapting field theory (Rey 2004).² This is even more surprising considering that Bourdieu's first explications on social fields in the early 1970s emerged from an analysis of the religious sphere (Bourdieu 1971). Nevertheless, field theory may contribute to solving a core problem of the study of religion, namely, the question of how to overcome the idea of religion as a phenomenon *sui generis* and, thus, to analyze its intersections with other social spheres. Field theory is grounded in a relational approach that challenges substantialist

² Important exceptions include Verter (2003), Reuter (2009), Quack (2013).

thinking and the essentialization of social entities (Bourdieu 1992b, 224–235). In recent years, several scholars have postulated relationality as a new paradigm in the study of religion (e.g., Krech 2019; Krüger 2021). However, no consensus has emerged on how to interpret this shift. Many different methods and theories provide tools to think relationally in terms of “entanglements,” “interferences,” or “boundary work.” I will demonstrate in my case study that field theory represents one fruitful approach that can move the discussion forward.

In a nutshell, the concept of social fields serves as a heuristic tool to analyze a more or less autonomous microcosm such as religion, science, or politics. In this sense, field theory is predicated on the assumption that modern societies have gone through a process of differentiation. According to Bourdieu, social actors within a field share a common sense of what is at stake therein and consequently compete with one another to secure or accumulate power for themselves in the form of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Field theory does not reduce this competition to subjective decisions of individual actors. Rather, each field consists of a set of relations between the objective social positions of producers and consumers or, in some cases, among producers themselves.

In Bourdieu’s early publications on the religious field, the struggle between different types of religious specialists—the priest, the prophet, and the sorcerer—plays out in relation to certain groups of consumers, the laity (Bourdieu 1971, 1991). In his later writing on the scientific field, however, Bourdieu postulates that in highly autonomous fields “[P]roducers tend to have no possible clients other than their competitors (and the greater the autonomy of the field, the more this is so)” (Bourdieu 1975, 23). Although this characterization of the scientific field has been met with criticism (Eyal 2013), my empirical research lends support to Bourdieu’s central insight. I will come back to this point later.

Some scholars have criticized Bourdieu, noting that, although he minutely analyzes the relations between different positions within a given field, he does not provide a satisfying answer to the question of how fields themselves relate to one another (Verter 2003, 163; Eyal 2013, 158–159). It is true that Bourdieu was hesitant to address this issue (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 109). Nevertheless, there are valuable passages in his work that hint at a solution to the problem of shifting or intersecting fields. Bourdieu approached the question of how fields relate to one another from a variety of perspectives, the first being a historical approach to the “dissolution” of the religious field. Furthermore, he advanced a macro-sociological explanation of how the power relations between different social fields are negotiated within a “field of power,” and discussed the historical micro-sociological example of “*institutions bâtarde*,” (Bourdieu 1992a) here referred to as “hybrid

institutions.” As I will later apply these concepts to my case study, a short review of their core meaning is in order.

In 1987 Pierre Bourdieu published a lecture—originally held in 1982—titled “*La dissolution du religieux*,” which has not been published in English so far (Bourdieu 1987). Terry Rey (2014, 64) translates the French title as “The dissolution of the religious.”³ In this text, Bourdieu breaks with his earlier analysis of the religious field as a clearly bounded space. By looking at the religious landscape of the 1980s, he calls attention to a historical change: The hitherto clear-cut boundaries of the religious field have become fuzzy. New religious specialists have entered a space that had been the monopoly of clergymen for centuries. “Cults,” psychoanalysts, social workers, and other figures interested in the definition of health and healing are now providing their own salvation goods. Reacting to the new competitors in the field, clergymen have started to appropriate the methods of the newcomers. For instance, priests are making use of psychoanalysis, which inevitably puts their own position in the field at risk. The boundaries between the religious field and other fields such as the medical field are shifting, and consequently “a new field of struggle over the symbolic manipulation of the conduct of private life and the orientation of one’s vision of the world” emerges (Bourdieu 1987, 119; Rey 2014, 65). One result of moving boundaries between distinct fields may be the emergence of a new all-embracing field.

The discussion of such a profound shift across social fields seems to be an exception within Bourdieu’s work. His writing tends rather to suggest that social fields persist, undergoing only small fluctuations due to social actors jockeying for position. However, in his work, one can find two very different explanations of how and where competition between different fields takes place. The first explanation is situated at the social macro-level. In *The State Nobility*, Bourdieu suggests that the different social fields (“subfields”) are nested within an overarching “field of power” (Bourdieu 1996b; see Eyal 2013, 160–161). Whereas the struggles within autonomous social fields take place over one specific form of capital (religious, scientific, etc.), struggles within the field of power aim at determining “the relative value and magnitude of the different forms of power” (Bourdieu 1996b, 265). Hence, the exchange rates and legitimacy of different forms of capital are negotiated within the field of power (Bourdieu 1996b, 264–265). This means that not only the power relations within a given field are constantly negotiated, but also the power relations among fields themselves.

In contrast, the second explanation relies on a micro-sociological example. In *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu identifies the French “salons” of the 19th century as a place where actors from the political and literary fields became entangled. He writes,

³ In English “dissolution” has a double meaning of disintegration and debauchery, whereas in French “dissolution” does not have that second, normative connotation.

The salons are also, through the exchanges that take place there, genuine articulations between the fields: those who hold political power aim to impose their vision on artists and to appropriate for themselves the power of consecration and of legitimation which they hold [...]; for their part, the writers and artists, acting as solicitors and intercessors, or even sometimes as true pressure groups, endeavour to assure for themselves a mediating control of the different material or symbolic rewards distributed by the state. (Bourdieu 1996a, 51)

Within these hybrid institutions, the members of the political field are “caught in a double bind—powerful enough to be taken seriously by writers and artists, without being sufficiently so to be taken seriously by the powerful” (Bourdieu 1996a, 51). According to this explanation, we would empirically find an articulation between fields in concrete places where actors of different fields somehow engage with one another and profit from this interaction.

To evaluate these three approaches and assess their strengths and shortcomings, I will look at the history of expertise on NRMs in Switzerland from the Long Sixties to the early 1980s. In particular, I will focus on the emergence of an institution at the crossroads of the religious and scientific fields. Given the controversial nature of my research object, a short definitory and contextual introduction to the history of expertise on NRMs constitutes a necessary preliminary step.

3 Expertise on NRMs: Definitions and Context

To contextualize expertise on NRMs, one must first consider how each term is defined. The variety of meanings and nuances associated with these notions poses a terminological challenge. Above all, however, the way I define “expertise on NRMs” must be useful to my present case study, without claiming to be appropriate for every geographical and historical context.

In the Western context, the term NRM spread within the academic study of religion from the late 1960s onwards. Originally, its introduction served a double purpose: On the one hand, it was used as a technical term to address several religious movements that were founded or flourished in the United States after the Second World War and which did not fit the sociological types of “church,” “sect,” and “cult” (Ashcraft 2018, 51–52). On the other hand, the term NRM served to counteract the negative connotations of the notions of “cults” or “sects” (German: *Sekte*), which became popular in the wake of the counter-cult and anti-cult movement as catch-all terms for movements such as the Children of God, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Scientology, and the Unification Church. Sociologists of religion were aware of the problems connected with such generalizations in public discourse and debated the exact meaning of each component of the term—*new*, *religious*, and *movement* (Melton 1987; Barker 1989a). Despite the intense scholarly debate, little consensus was found, and some authors extended the concept chronologically and geographically to an ever-larger number of groups, such as 19th-century Christian revival groups. In this chapter, however, I use NRMs in the narrow sense of the term and use it to characterize those movements that gained ground

within the North American counterculture of the 1960s and became involved in public controversies in several Western countries during the subsequent years.

Scholars of religion have discussed at length not only NRMs but also the responses to NRMs (Beckford 1985; Barker 1989b; Arweck 2006; Königstedt 2016; Ashcraft 2018). Frequently, their interest in the dynamics of “cult watching” was propelled by negative media reports of NRMs. Scholars of religion have categorized reactions to NRMs by interest group. For instance, they distinguish between reactions by churches, parents’ organizations, the social sciences, the state, and the media. Introvigne (1995) and Melton (2005) introduced a prominent distinction between the secular anti-cult movement (ACM) and the evangelical counter-cult movement (CCM). The ACM and the CCM represent the most outspoken critics of NRMs since the late 1960s, while focusing on different aspects of the phenomenon—the former on practices, the latter on belief. A broader typology of so-called cult-watching groups (CWG) has been developed by Barker, which includes not only critics of NRMs such as cult-awareness groups or counter-cult groups but also research-oriented groups with an academic interest in NRMs and human rights and cult-defender groups, who take the side of NRMs (Barker 2004, 2007).

All these typologies categorize responses to NRMs by looking at how various social actors relate to NRMs. However, they generally overlook how different expert groups relate to one another. To assume a substantial difference, for example, between social-scientific and ecclesiastical reactions to NRMs carries the risk of essentializing each of these social fields—and possibly missing hybrid forms of response. By contrast, I suggest that relations among the various producers of expertise on NRMs can tell us more about how allegedly distinct spheres such as religion, science, and politics interacted in reacting to the emergence of a new religiosity.

For this reason, I shall include a number of stakeholders under a single umbrella term. Barker’s ideal-typical concept of cult-watching groups (Barker 2007) would be broad enough, but the construction of “ideal-types” complicates the assessment of the relations between allegedly distinct social spheres. Recent scholarship has employed the concepts of “researching NRMs” (Arweck 2006) or the “study of NRMs” (Ashcraft 2018) to include a number of practices of competing actors. Arweck (2006, 4) advocates a broad notion of research and avoids attributing a “unique privilege to the voice of the academics/social scientists in this field of study.” Although I share to a large extent Arweck’s perspective, I prefer the concept of “expertise” to “research” in this context for two reasons. First, in contrast to “research,” expertise may account for a position that does not always (or not only) correspond with an academic title or affiliation. Rather, the expert status depends to a large extent on self-proclamation and recognition by other competitors. As Stampnitzky (2011, 2) puts it, “When I speak of ‘experts,’ I refer to the pool of those treated as experts and those hoping/trying to be treated

as experts.” Second, expertise entails more than the practice of researching in the sense of gathering and structuring information on a certain subject. To a large extent, it also means fulfilling a self-given or externally given task of providing reliable information to certain groups of consumers. In that sense, expertise points to a status and activity that goes beyond theoretical considerations and is equally practice-oriented. Thus, in my case study, I apply the notion of expertise on NRMs to a number of practices aimed at collecting, processing, and disseminating information developed by individuals and institutions in Switzerland from the 1960s onwards. The next section introduces the beginnings of expertise on NRMs in Switzerland during the Long Sixties.

4 The Emergence of Expertise on NRMs in Switzerland

After their establishment in the United States, NRMs such as the Children of God, Scientology, Transcendental Meditation, and the Unification Church made their way to Switzerland in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Mayer 1993, 359–390). As Mayer (1993, 324–325) points out, the first responses to these movements were not yet influenced by the critique of the American ACM. Parents’ organizations of a similar kind emerged in Switzerland only during the 1980s.⁴ However, individual representatives of the Protestant Churches and Roman Catholic Church in Switzerland had been dealing with alternative religions more intensively since the mid-1950s. The core interest of these early experts lay on non-mainstream Christian groups of the 19th century, which they identified as “sects” or “special groups” (German: *Sondergruppen*). When they detected NRMs in Switzerland in the early 1970s, they only dedicated a small number of articles to these movements, which were not well known at all (Eggenberger 1972a, 1972b). Nevertheless, the experts on sects (*Sektenexperten*) of the 1960s were the precursors of experts on NRMs in Switzerland in the 1980s. Through their multifaceted practices—documenting the religious landscape, publishing handbooks and articles, providing information to the Churches and the general public—they laid the groundwork for the more institutionalized approaches of the following decades. During the 1960s, expertise on alternative religions was limited to the theological domain and was held by practitioners who fulfilled ecclesiastical functions. In consequence, such expertise was concentrated within the religious field.

From 1955 to the late 1970s, four figures gained the status of publicly known experts on sects in the German-speaking part of Switzerland: the Protestant theologians Fritz Blanke, Oswald Eggenberger, and Eduard Gerber, as well as the Catholic theologian Albert Ebnetter, SJ.⁵ Their main

⁴ Two of the most prominent critics of NRMs were the “Swiss Working Group against Destructive Cults” (*Schweizerische Arbeitsgemeinschaft gegen destruktive Kulte*) (SADK) and the Swiss branch of the French “Association for the defense of the family and the individual” (*Association pour la défense de la famille et de l’individu*) (ADFI).

⁵ There are no similar figures to be found for the French-speaking part of Switzerland in the 1960s. Even in the 1980s, the Western part of Switzerland did not see any ecclesiastical institutions built up exclusively for cult watching. The reason for this could not be clearly assessed. In general, interviewees in the field point out that the “awareness of the ‘cult problem’” must have been different in the French-speaking part.

interest rested on theological questions pertaining to the distinctions between the established Churches, alternative Christian groups of the 19th centuries such as the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Pentecostal movement, and a few Eastern religious strands of the early 20th century in Europe (Blanke 1955; 1957; Eggenberger 1969; Gerber 1974). The personal backgrounds and theological presuppositions of these four individuals provide important insights to understand the underlying motivations of their work and the emergence of expertise on NRMs in Switzerland during the 1960s.

Fritz Blanke (1900–1967) was a professor of Church history at the University of Zurich. While a member of the official Swiss Protestant Church, he also had strong connections to the Free Church milieu (Schmid 2016, 125; Möhl 2011, 70–72). Blanke published a guidebook on “churches and sects” in 1955, which was continued by his student, pastor Oswald Eggenberger (1923–2003).⁶ Supported by the Protestant Church of Canton Zurich, Eggenberger founded the first information center on “churches, special groups, and religious movements” in Switzerland in 1963, known as the Evangelical Orientation Center. Eggenberger set up an extensive archive documenting the religious landscape in Switzerland by collecting a wide range of primary literature issued by religious groups. On a smaller scale, he also visited church services of different denominations. His research informed a quarterly “information sheet” which was sent to all Protestant pastors in the canton of Zurich and offered for a fee to an interested public.⁷ The information provided by Eggenberger was twofold. On the one hand, he summarized historical and contemporary data about religious groups, on the other hand, he critically evaluated their theological concepts from a Protestant, biblical perspective. According to Georg O. Schmid, the present director of the Evangelical Orientation Center, Eggenberger maintained good relationships with evangelical, non-Pentecostal Free Churches.

Eduard Gerber (1918–2012) was the first Mennonite (German: *Alttäufer*) to be ordained as a pastor for the Protestant Church of Canton Bern. In conferences, courses, and press articles, Gerber combined educational work on churches and “sects” with a commitment to the ecumenical movement. On several occasions, he defended minority religions attacked in the tabloids (Gerber 1974). Finally, Albert Ebnetter (1915–2012) was director of the Jesuit Apologetics Institute in Zurich, and published broadly on both alternative religions and the ecumenical movement.⁸ Emphasizing the positive sides of Free Churches and “sects” sometimes earned him criticism from colleagues within the Order (Bruhin 2013).

The personal and theological background of these four individuals should not be underestimated in seeking to understand the presuppositions of expertise on alternative religions in Switzerland

⁶ Eggenberger's handbook “The Churches, Special Groups and Religious Associations” (Eggenberger 1969) went through seven editions, the last being edited by Schmid and Schmid (2003).

⁷ First annual report of the Evangelical Orientation Center, 1964. StAZH.

⁸ See the journal “Orientierung,” ed. Apologetisches Institut, Zürich (<http://www.orientierung.ch>).

during the 1960s. It is very likely that the experiences of Blanke and Gerber as members of both the Protestant Church and the Free Churches, as well as Ebnetter's membership of an order that was legally interdicted in Switzerland from 1874 to 1973 promoted their positive stance towards the ecumenical movement and stirred their interest in minority religions. During the early 1960s, such a position was not commonly acknowledged among Swiss theologians, and some of the experts mentioned were criticized for being too liberal with regard to Free Churches and "sects." One should keep in mind that despite the growing influence of the World Council of Churches and the convening of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, the longstanding confessional divisions within Swiss society had not yet lost their relevance. Thus, in contrast to the evangelical counter-cult movement in Northern America (Cowan 2003), the interest in alternative religious groups in Switzerland was not fueled by a polemic intent. Although, Blanke, Eggenberger, Gerber, and Ebnetter clearly rejected religious doctrines that differed from those of the mainstream Churches, their attitudes were rooted in theological ideas of tolerance (Eggenberger 1969, 6–9).

From a field-theoretical perspective, expertise on sects in Switzerland during the 1960s emerged as a niche within the religious field dominated by the established Churches. The positions of experts on sects reflected the struggle over a more general principle of vision and division (Bourdieu 2005, 36) at the time, namely whether to support the ecumenical movement or not and how far one should go in both criticizing and tolerating religion outside one's own church. Despite the similar perspective of these Protestant and Catholic theologians interested in alternative religions, no cooperation was institutionalized among them during the Long Sixties. However, when NRMs became more visible in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the ecumenical standpoint was suddenly integral to the reactions by the mainstream Churches, resulting in a joint research and information center. In addition, new actors and institutions attached to the scientific field became involved in researching NRMs. The next section will show how expertise on alternative religions was transformed from a niche within the religious field into a crossroads between the religious and scientific fields.

5 The Ecumenical Working Group on NRMs: A Space between the Religious and Scientific Fields

The idea of looking more closely and in greater detail at NRMs in Switzerland did not come from one of the early experts on sects introduced in the previous section. Three of them, however, did later become involved in this, after the creation of a new research and information center on NRMs sponsored by the Catholic and Protestant Churches. In 1979, the Swiss Bishop's Conference (SBC) launched a Working Group on 'Youth Religions in Switzerland.' First established as a subcommission of the SBC's Theological Commission, it later became an independent organ

reporting directly to the bishops.⁹ The founding members of the Catholic Working Group, however, lacked experience in studying NRMs. Therefore, they soon invited the Protestant experts on sects, Oswald Eggenberger and Eduard Gerber, to counsel them.¹⁰ Eggenberger and Gerber would later become official members of the group, while Ebnetter participated as a guest consultant.

In 1982, the Working Group on ‘Youth Religions’ changed its name to Working Group on ‘New Religious Movements’ and, in 1983, adopted standing rules as an Ecumenical Working Group (EWG) implemented by both the SBC and the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (FSPC).¹¹ The SBC and FSPC each elected six members to the EWG, which met approximately five times a year. The task of the Working Group was to study the questions raised by NRMs from scratch and to advise the heads of the Churches on concrete actions to be taken. These goals already hint at the double function of the EWG as a study group on NRMs and an advisory institution for the Churches. In practice, the EWG did not only advise the Churches on actions to be taken, but also set up and coordinated a nationwide counseling network of local pastors and priests for people seeking advice on NRMs.

Right from the start, the EWG connected with two scholars of religion, Richard Friedli (b. 1937) at the University of Fribourg and Otto Bischofberger (1935–1997) at the University of Lucerne. Friedli and Bischofberger were both trained in Catholic theology but held professorial positions in *Religionswissenschaft*. In the 1980s, most institutes for the study of religion in Switzerland were located at faculties of theology (Uehlinger 2010, 8) and most scholars of religion held a degree in theology as well. After the Working Group’s ecumenical turn, two other scholars of religion—originally trained in Protestant theology—joined the team: Carl-A. Keller (1920–2008), professor for the study of religion at the University of Lausanne, and Georg Schmid (b. 1940), who later served as adjunct professor for the study of religion at the University of Zurich. The only scholar trained in sociology of religion (and Protestant theology) who was nominated to the EWG was Roland J. Campiche (b. 1937) from the University of Lausanne. Additionally, the historian of religion Jean-François Mayer (b. 1957) served as an advisor to the EWG.

The connection to the scientific field did not remain on the level of individual actors. Already during its first meeting, the Working Group discussed the possibility of establishing an academic documentation center and, thus, of institutionalizing the cooperation with scholars of religion. The Institute for Missiology and the Study of Religion at the University of Fribourg had already collected data on the “groups under scrutiny.” For this reason, a fruitful cooperation could be swiftly

⁹ Protocols of the Working Group on ‘Youth Religions in Switzerland’; Protocols of the Theological Commission of the SBC. AGSSBK.

¹⁰ Anniversary brochure of the Catholic Working Group on NRMs in Switzerland, 1999. BAR.

¹¹ Standing rules of the EWG, 28.03.1983. BAR.

established.¹² Due to its status as a bilingual city on the border of the French and German-speaking parts of Switzerland, Fribourg was also seen as a good choice for setting up a documentation center. Finally, the accessibility for the public and the academic prestige certainly played a role in this decision. When Richard Friedli moved from the Faculty of Theology to the Faculty of Humanities in the 1990s, the documentation center was relocated to the newly founded Institute for the Study of Religion, although Friedli was no longer a member of the EWG at the time.

Set up as an ecclesiastical institution, but drawing on resources from the scientific field, the EWG was confronted from its start with contrasting perspectives on its goals. Some members wanted to prioritize the provision of support for pastoral care, while others insisted the goal should be to understand the background of the phenomenon from the perspective of the study of religion.¹³ Some scholars of religion questioned the effectiveness of pastoral help if the “problem of youth sects” was addressed through a commonsense understanding rather than via a scientific approach. They cautioned their colleagues about the danger of appropriating the practices and discourses of cult-watching groups in the Federal Republic of Germany. Concretely, scholars of religion opposed the notion of “youth religions” (German: *Jugendreligionen*) promoted by the Bavarian pastor and expert on sects Friedrich-Wilhelm Haack (1935–1991).

Haack was one of the most outspoken critics of NRMs in German-speaking Europe and used the terms “youth religion” and “youth sects” (German: *Jugendsekten*) to characterize a small number of religious groups referred to as NRMs within the study of religion (Arweck 2006, 222–257). To warn about their allegedly dangerous methods, he coined the concepts of “soul washing” (*Seelenwäsche*) and “psychomutation” (*Psychomutation*) (Haack 1979, 42–48; Arweck 2006, 234–236). By changing its name from Working Group on ‘Youth Religions’ to Working Group on ‘New Religious Movements’ the EWG sought to distance itself from Haack and like-minded experts on sects, while simultaneously moving closer to the academic discourse on NRMs. It is very likely that the opposition to so-called sect hunters (*Sektenjäger*)—as the EWG derogatorily labeled anti-NRMs polemicists—bridged diverging perspectives within the EWG itself.

Nevertheless, this dividing line also ran through the Swiss context, as Haack’s ideas had an impact on another counseling center in the Canton of Lucerne. As a consequence, much effort within the EWG was spent to deal with the Ecclesiastical Counseling Center on Questions of Sects in Lucerne, which was financed by the local governing body of the Catholic Church and run by a young Catholic curate, Reiner Krieger (b. 1949). Krieger had adopted practices and discourses promoted by Haack and was skeptical about the study-of-religion approach propagated by the EWG. Looking back at the

¹² Protocol of the Working Group on ‘Youth Religions,’ 14.03.1980. AGSSBK.

¹³ *Ibid.*

1980s, Krieger emphasizes the difference between a scientific perspective on NRMs, on the one hand, and a counseling approach, on the other.¹⁴ From his point of view, some scholars of religion were too close to their research subjects, speaking for instance at events organized by NRMs. This reproach ties in with a transnational controversy surrounding the participation of academics in conferences sponsored by NRMs in the 1980s (Ashcraft 2018, 84–90; Arweck, 219–221, 241–243).

The external opposition between a more polemical and a more scientific approach towards NRMs should not hide the fact that the EWG also took a normative stance on NRMs. Theological judgments and descriptions of NRMs from a study-of-religion perspective often went hand in hand. This can be illustrated by one of the first information sheets distributed by the EWG in 1981, titled “‘Youth religions’ in Switzerland.”¹⁵ In it, the EWG put forward a sociological analysis of social change after the Second World War to explain why NRMs attract young people. “Within the past years,” it says, a “new religiosity” has emerged that “can only be understood within the wider context of manifold changes in society and church.” Hitherto self-evident values like “trust, the meaning of life, respect of fellow human beings, fatherland, loving kindness, naturalness” have been lost “following the Second World War, the nuclear bombing of Japan and rapid industrialization.” Drawing on the influential work of the German sociologist Helmut Schelsky (1957), the authors of the brochure explained that “many young people understand themselves as members of the ‘skeptical generation.’” They lacked “exemplary role models within our political, economic, military and ecclesiastical institutions.” Living in a “fatherless society” they sought a “spiritual leader.” In such a social and ecclesiastical context, the “new religions” promised security in terms of life decisions and belief.

So far, the analysis of the EWG may have conformed with social-scientific insights on NRMs at the time. However, the information sheet went beyond a sociological explanation of social and religious change. It evaluated whether membership of an NRM was compatible with Christianity, concluding that it was not, and provided recommendations for “worried parents” whose children joined an NRM. In addition to practical advice—for instance, talking calmly about the dangers of NRMs or avoiding giving large sums of money to a child that had joined one—the EWG also suggested that parents acquainted themselves with the offers of youth groups within the mainstream Churches: “It may be that your child finds there what they sought within ‘youth religions.’” Thus, on the discursive level social-scientific, theological, and pastoral arguments were closely connected to one another.

A similar interdependence of theological and sociological arguments could also be found in the publications of scholars of religion. For instance, parts of Bischofberger’s 1979 “*Youth Religions*”

¹⁴ Interview with Reiner Krieger, September 30, 2019.

¹⁵ Information sheet of the Working Group on ‘Youth Religions’, 1981, BAR.

(the term was explicitly placed in quotation marks) clearly served as a template for the brochure of the EWG. Bischofberger (1979, 4) stressed his intention was not to “defend, accuse, or even condemn, but to inform and encourage a sober debate.” At the same time, however, the subtitle of the publication, “Signs of the Times and a Challenge for Us,” alluded to a biblical passage (Matt. 16:2b–3) which gained significance in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, as the Catholic Church sought to engage more closely with contemporary society (Amor 2014). In that sense, scholars of religion within the EWG examined new forms of religiosity in light of both scholarly and ecclesiastical debates.

Finally, the double affiliation—academic and ecclesiastical—of many EWG members manifested itself at the level of their practices. Within the EWG there was no strict separation between activities such as documenting NRMs, public education in the form of talks, and parent counseling. Although the EWG delegated most counseling work to local pastors, its members did not refrain from participating in it. Thus, scholars of religion did not stick to the conventional academic task of researching NRMs, but they also answered individual requests for help. Expertise on NRMs in Switzerland during the 1980s was in that sense distinctively practice-oriented, integrating social-scientific and pastoral approaches.

6 Preliminary Discussion

After reviewing how expertise on sects and NRMs developed from the 1960s to the 1980s in Switzerland, it is now time to discuss the empirical findings in terms of field theory and to assess how suitable the aforementioned theoretical tools found in Bourdieu’s work are for analyzing the intersection of the religious and scientific fields. In addition, the recent concept of “interstitial spaces” will be presented as a promising theoretical alternative for thinking relationally about differentiation and dedifferentiation.

First, the concept of “the dissolution of the religious” can illuminate some aspects of our case study. Bourdieu’s reflections on the relationship between religious supply and demand in the 1980s find an instantiation in the way the religious landscape was observed and studied at the end of the Long Sixties. As I showed, the monopoly of Protestant and Catholic theologians as public experts on sects during the 1960s started to crumble in the early 1980s. Just as some priests integrated psychoanalytic tools in their religious supply, theologians who studied alternative religions also started to embrace social-scientific discourses. Simultaneously, the groups of consumers addressed by experts on NRMs were extended from a primarily ecclesiastical audience to an academic and public one.

In theoretical terms, however, the concept of the “dissolution of the religious” possesses a shortcoming that prevents a balanced description of intersecting fields. To speak of dissolution only makes sense if we look at a process of fuzzification from within a certain field, in this case from the perspective of religion. It is, however, also possible to look at this development from the perspective of another field, such as the scientific field. In that case we would see a process of extension rather than dissolution, because scholars of religion gained ground on the field traditionally occupied by clergymen. Even so, both these ways of describing changing power relations between social fields would be one-sided. Concepts like “dissolution” or “extension” do not adequately grasp those zones where various fields overlap and actors can take advantage of—or compete for—resources from different spheres. In the case of the EWG, the participating members made use of both religious *and* scientific capital in setting up an institution simultaneously linked to academia and the Churches. At least during the early 1980s, the EWG was a space where neither the religious nor the scientific perspective could predominate.

Second, we can consider whether the power relations between the religious and scientific fields were negotiated at the social macro-level within a field of power or rather at the micro-level within a kind of hybrid institution. Right away, neither perspective appears completely suitable to describe the emergence and structures of the Ecumenical Working Group. Let us consider the macro-sociological perspective first. One could say that the struggles over the legitimate perspective between the EWG and other competitors (such as Haack) took place within the field of power. The opposition between the EWG, which promoted social-scientific terminologies, and more polemical actors that stood for a pastoral approach speaks for such an interpretation. Both sides tried to strengthen the relative value of either their scientific or religious capital. However, many of the members of the EWG itself cannot be ascribed easily to the scientific or religious field. Through their academic and professional careers, they had incorporated, as Bourdieu (1998) would put it, a double habitus. Not only could they draw on religious *or* scientific capital depending on the situation, but they used both forms of capital for their research and information practice on NRMs in such close connection that a sort of hybrid capital emerged. Thus, the EWG exemplifies less how power relations between various fields are negotiated than it demonstrates how a creative space can develop where it is hard to draw a clear distinction between the religious and the scientific fields.

In many ways, this line of argument seems to support an approach that focuses on the question of intersecting fields at the micro-level. This, however, is only partially the case. Of course, the EWG was a small undertaking with only twelve members, which may be assimilated to the 19th-century salons described by Bourdieu. But the EWG was clearly more than just a specific place where individuals from different social fields gathered and became involved in a double game.

Institutionally, the Working Group was closely linked to the mainstream Churches and academic institutions. Sociologically speaking, these institutions would rather be situated at the meso-level. In that sense, the EWG can be interpreted as an articulation between meso-level institutions of the religious and scientific fields. The link between the churches and academia, however, was only possible on condition that individual actors spoke the language and were used to the practices of both the religious and scientific fields.

So far, I have explored the strengths and shortcomings of Bourdieu's approach to explain relations between multiple fields, drawing on my case study of expertise on NRMs. However, this is but one example of possible intersections between autonomous social fields. Recently, sociologists working on (transnational) expert fields have developed analytical models of what are often referred to as interstitial spaces, i.e. spaces between fields (Vauchez 2011; Stampnitzky 2011; Eyal 2013). In the light of my case study, they present promising tools to think social fields relationally and to overcome some of the limitations in Bourdieu's approaches. Studies on interstitial spaces are concerned with "arenas of cultural production that cross borders, lack defined boundaries, and include personnel, ideas, and techniques that travel *between* multiple fields" (Stampnitzky 2013, 92).

Focusing on spaces between allegedly distinct spheres, these studies challenge the assumption of social differentiation without presupposing the direction of dedifferentiation processes in the sense of "dissolution" or "extension." Rather, they strive to consider "double meaning" (I would add "multiple meaning" as well) for what it is, without trying to reduce its significance to one side or another (Eyal 2013, 160). Their focus on meso-level institutions such as, for instance, think tanks (Medvetz 2014), prevents them from hastily drawing theoretical conclusions at the macro or micro-level. The concept of interstitial spaces does not contradict the assumption of social fields as fundamental structures of modern society, but serves as a heuristic tool to identify spaces where forces from various fields are at work and where new forms of practice are likely to emerge, which may have an effect on the boundaries of adjacent fields as well. In that sense, looking at spaces between fields contributes to a more dynamic perspective on social spheres.

7 Interstitial Spaces and Social Change

In connection to this line of thought, I would like to discuss two remaining questions linked to my case study that are also relevant for further developing the concept of interstitial spaces. First, I will investigate why such spaces appear in the first place, and then I will reflect on how they develop over time. I will tackle these questions drawing on my case study, taking into account the social context from the 1960s to the 1980s, and sketching the further development of that specific space.

Expertise on NRMs in Switzerland and other Western countries emerged in the wake of increased social and religious change. On the one hand, the established Churches slid into a “religious crisis” (McLeod 2007); on the other hand, a “spiritual awakening” (Ellwood 1994) rippled through society. In this context of a changing religious and social order, the previously unquestioned status of Protestant and Catholic theologians as experts on religion was challenged. As the establishment of the Ecumenical Working Group in the early 1980s shows, the Churches did not lose their institutional power to inform the public about religion, but also began to rub shoulders with a slowly institutionalizing *Religionswissenschaft*.

Conversely, the fact that scholars of religion were interested in participating in a hybrid institution promoted by the Churches but drawing on academic resources is revealing of the state of the study of religion itself, which was still informed by double career paths that combined culture studies and social sciences with theological approaches. In short, the EWG was founded precisely at a moment when the Churches were confronted with a loss of power and the study of religion was not yet established as an autonomous discipline that was clearly distinct from theology. These observations suggest that periods of social dynamism may prompt the emergence of interstitial spaces (for a similar analysis, see Eyal 2013, 179–180). The stability of such an interstitial space, however, also depends on social changes. In the case of the EWG, almost all scholars of religion slowly dropped out of the Working Group between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s, after which the EWG positioned itself more clearly as an apologetic-ecclesiastical commission. The increasing orientation of the study of religion towards cultural studies and social sciences as well as the Churches’ apologetic realignment made close cooperation as experts on NRMs increasingly difficult.

Although the interstitial space of the EWG became disentangled from the study of religion in the late 1980s, expertise on NRMs in Switzerland became more complex during the early 1990s. New actors from the journalistic field and the legal field, but also academics trained in psychology and psychiatry claimed expertise on NRMs and started to compete with the narratives provided by theologians and scholars of religion during previous decades. With the foundation of the information and counseling center infoSekta¹⁶ in Zürich in 1990, new forms of interstitial positions emerged. Although partly financed by the mainstream Churches and promoted by local politicians and governmental authorities, the center stressed its political and denominational independence. In contrast to the EWG and its study-of-religion perspective, infoSekta made connections with the Swiss Working Group against Destructive Cults, a parents’ organization founded in 1987, which adopted practices drawn from the international anti-cult movement of that time.

¹⁶ See infoSekta’s current website: <https://www.infosekta.ch/>.

After the mass murder and suicide of members of the Order of the Solar Temple in Switzerland in 1994, the “cult issue” featured more prominently on the national political agenda. A parliamentary commission examined whether “sects” presented a danger for individuals, the state, and society and made recommendations to the Federal Council as the basis for policy development.¹⁷ However, the executive authorities perceived the existing legal requirement as sufficient and did not agree on taking actions. In 2001, four cantons in the French and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland supported the foundation of a trans-local information center on “religious beliefs,” in French, the *Centre intercantonal d’information sur les croyances* (CIC).¹⁸ The staff of the CIC is trained in the study of religion and the sociology of religion. In contrast to infoSekta, the CIC distinguishes itself clearly from so-called anti-cult groups and stresses its cooperation with academic institutions.¹⁹

In view of these further developments of expertise on NRMs in Switzerland up to the current time, it becomes clear that many different forms of cooperation and competition emerged and later disappeared within a fluid intellectual and practice-oriented domain. As the interstitial position of the EWG between the mainstream Churches and the study of religion slowly disappeared, new spaces between other fields emerged. In that sense, expertise on NRMs—or alternative religions in a broader sense—constitutes a telling example of a space of cultural production that crisscrosses a range of social fields and involves individuals and meso-level institutions in multiple games.

8 Conclusion

By retracing the emergence of expertise on NRMs in Switzerland, I have shown how relations between the religious and scientific fields developed from the 1960s to the early 1980s in that specific case. At a particular moment in time, when NRMs became known in Switzerland and the mainstream Churches took advantage of resources drawn from the academic study of religion, an interstitial space—involving ecclesiastical and academic institutions—was created. Within that space, experts on religion holding a double habitus (as pastors and scholars of religion) relied on hybrid forms of capital in their research and information practices on NRMs.

As I have shown, the notion of interstitial spaces overcomes some of the shortcomings of Bourdieu’s field theory in explaining the intersections of social fields at the meso-level, without reducing them to one specific field. Nevertheless, the field-theoretical toolbox provided by Bourdieu still provides a wide range of useful concepts that can be further developed. In the light of the

¹⁷ Geschäftsprüfungskommission des Nationalrates, “‘Sekten’ oder vereinnahmende Bewegungen in der Schweiz – Die Notwendigkeit staatlichen Handelns oder Wege zu einer eidgenössischen ‘Sekten’-Politik,” July 1, 1999, Fedlex, https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/fga/1999/1_9884_9188_8745/de.

¹⁸ See the current website of the CIC, <https://cic-info.ch/>.

¹⁹ Nathalie Narbel in an interview with Religioscope, September 28, 2004; Interview with Nicole Durisch Gauthier, January 18, 2021.

sociological question of social differentiation and dedifferentiation, it might be of particular interest to ask how interstitial spaces emerge and how they eventually disappear. The case study of expertise on NRMs suggests that situations of dynamic social (and religious) change create conditions under which such spaces develop. In that sense, the Long Sixties present a promising period for the study of religion to explore further spaces between religion and other social fields.

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