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Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 30 July 2018

The 'secular', the 'religious' and the 'refugee' in Germany

Podcast with **Carmen Becker** (22 October 2018).

Interviewed by **Christopher Cotter.**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/the-secular-the-religous-and-the-refugee-in-germany/

Christopher Cotter (**CC**): *We are recording this interview on what I believe is the International Day of the Refugee. And I'm joined in Bern, at the European Association for the Study of Religions Conference, by Carmen Becker. And we are going to be talking about the role of religion and secularity in the construction of the category of the refugee, and the sort-of mutual co-constructing natures of those discourses, with particular reference to Germany. Carmen is based at the Leibnitz University at Hannover. And she's done a lot of work on various historical constructions of Salafism. And we're going to be talking about her current project today. So first off – welcome to the Religious Studies Project, Carmen!*

Carmen Becker (CB): Thank you.

CC*: So I've just seen your presentation on the panel, there. This is 7o'clock in the evening which is quite late a conference, particularly when we had . . .*

CB: The Network dance the day before! (Laughs).

CC: *Exactly! They did not plan this well! But I've just seen your paper and it was excellent. And I'm hoping what we can do is have a sort of conversational version of that paper. So, first of all, if you can set the scene? Because people might be listening to this five years from now, ten years from now – who knows? So, what's happening? There's that phrase the "refugee crisis", the "migrant crisis" and things like that. Can you maybe just set the scene? In fact you started your paper with a couple of*

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anecdotes . . .

CB: That's true, yes. We're all aware of the term "refugee crisis". Since the summer of 2015, roughly, was when the high amounts of asylum seekers came to Germany and Austria – Europe in general. We still remember the scenes from television and so on of huge masses of people at the border between Hungary and Germany, trying to get into Germany. So there is a sort of imaginary behind it all. In 2015, I was still living in the Netherlands and, there, not so many people from Syria and Afghanistan and Iraq came to the Netherlands. Most of them went to Germany and to Sweden, actually. And when I travelled from the Netherlands to Hannover – this anecdote of the train stain station, famously – I was welcomed at Hannover train station by a Syrian man with a red rose, and a board saying "Thank you". And I really couldn't make sense of it. So I started talking to him and he explained that he wanted to thank the German people, as he put it, for welcoming the refugees in and for letting them cross the border from Hungary to Germany. And they really appreciated it and that was why they gave the rose. And I thought that was really intriguing, in a way. And then later, after I had moved to Hanover, a few weeks later, I saw that there was a Wikipedia entry dedicated to the European Refugee crisis. The title of the entry was European Refugee Crisis. And Wikipedia for me is sort of an instance that, when something gets an entry there it's established fact. It's a truth, right? This is a reference point. It's also interesting, then, to see how the truth is established on the editorial pages. But that's another thing. And this entry: European refugee crisis, which later turned into a European Migrant Crisis – you could also look why they used refugee in the beginning and migrant later on, but that's another story again – has been translated into 60 different languages, which is a lot I think. There are also substantial entries, not just a few words on it. But there are full texts on there. So something that actually . . . This is an image, the refugee crisis, that has travelled widely then, in several languages – also Arabic, Persian, Turkish and so on.

CC: *And so you use the term, "discursive event".*

CB: Yes. Because, I mean, how does something become recognised as an event, right? It has to be termed; images have to be established; it has to be understood as something disruptive, something out of the ordinary, something that is breaking into normality. And if we would have looked at the development before the so-called refugee crisis, it wouldn't have been so surprising. The camps in the region in Lebanon and Jordan they were just running out of money – camps provided by the United Nations Food Programme. They were issuing calls for donations. They were saying "If we don't get donations, we have to cut the amount we can give to those in our camps half. And the full amount is

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what they need to survive." So if you cut this in half, this is a crisis, in the sense that it's existential. (**5:00**) And this was known already by the end of 2014, beginning of 2015. And what do people do if they cannot survive? They move on. They run out of money, they don't get anything, so they look elsewhere. So that was expectable. But it still came as a surprise, as a wave, right? So it's interesting see how people perceive things and what they do not perceive – also in the media. In between the World Food Programme from the United Nations was calling for donations. But there was no connection, no further thinking about it. Also from the politicians – at least, done in public.

CC: *So we're going to get to the religion thing, of course, because we're on the Religious Studies Project. But you're going to try really hard here, because you're not going to have your diagrams!*

CB: Dammit! (Laughs).

CC: *But you've got some theories for us to set the scene. So Foucault . . .*

CB: Yes. So I like Foucault a lot when you think about how truth is established, in general. And I think in Religious Studies it's not surprising when someone uses discourse theory, to theorise something. What is not so common is to use the "dispositive" as a concept. It's something you find in Foucault's later work, right. And it's something he has never really fleshed out – like many things he hasn't fleshed out! (Laughs). And this is something that is now really discussed amongst journals of sociologists. I mean the dispositive as a concept: how do you do research with it? So, just in parallel, just like the discourse term was taken from Foucault and then fleshed out into different varying programmes of research, and research styles, and so forth the same is happening now and has been happening for roughly ten years in Germany, with reference to the dispositive. Yes. What is the dispositive?

CC: (Laughs).

CB: I always use the French language to make it clear. I was talking about three connotations of the dispositive – or three semantic fields that the dispositive brings us to. For example: first of all there's the dispositive as a sort of mechanism or sort of apparatus – that also reminds us of Gramsci, for example – that means that different elements in the system are put together and they function together. They link together so that they function as a machine, as an apparatus, as a mechanism – an alarm system I use as an example. You put different technical devices, manual knowledge about how to switch it on and off. So all different elements are put together then they are linked to each other so that

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the whole system can function. This is the baseline of what a dispositive is. And in, for example, in the French language they use the term "*dispositif d'alarme*" for alarm system. So you have the word dispositive.

CC: *Is it the system itself, or is it the connections that make the system?*

CB: It is the connections that make the system. And this is typical for Foucault, right? Also in discourse, it's not that much the content of the discourse but the rules that establish the discourse. And that's the same idea here. So how come these elements are ordered together to form the dispositive? What links them logically or illogically? So that's very important to look at the net that is established, between these elements. But of course we have to somehow identify these elements first, in order to see how they are connected and what functions they have in the dispositive. And then the second understanding: the dispositive is thought of as a strategic intervention. So it's a production that strategically intervenes into society, and responds to an emergency case. And this, I think, fits really nicely when you think of the refugee crisis, right? It's a crisis - we have to intervene. And also Germans were mobilised to volunteer, to donate. The State was busy building shelters, coming up with new administrative regulations, even now it's still going on. So there is a sort of pressing need to act, right? We have to do something. And again, this sort of strategic intervention is something that we can also see again in French language when I talk about the "*dispositifs de lutter contre le chomage*". So, all the means and the measures taken in order to fight unemployment for example. This was the dispositive event in the French language. And then on the third level – and this is similar to a discourse – that the dispositive establishes the current truth, the valid truth at the moment in time, right. Of course this can change, but at the point we are living it defines the truth just like discourse do. (**10:00**) What can we say about a refugee? What is a refugee? Who is a refugee? How do you talk about refugees? How are they? What do we project into them? This is established also in the dispositive. Which is quite similar to discourse research – right? – to flesh out how the objects . . . how discourses objectivate.

CC*: Excellent. And so, I know we're going to get to a wonderful example and I'm going to try and bring in some multi-media in.*

CB: Oh yes! (Laughs).

CC: *So there's a reason that you've chosen that as your example. So how are we utilising this notion*

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CB: That's a big question, when you're doing research. I'm also an ethnographer so I like to look at the micro-level, the local level. But as a trained political scientist I'm also looking at power, right? So I want to connect these levels. And then the question is, how does power work on a micro-level actually? And I mean, you could look at discourse. I would say what most of us do in discursive studies in religion, we look at the meso and macro-level of how religion is established as an object and so forth. But we don't look so much down on a local level, how it trickles down, how it shapes behaviour and practices, how people incorporate it in their lives. And this is where it becomes effective, actually. So what I look at is not so much at the . . . what Foucault usually did. He looked at how science or expert talk established knowledge.

CC: *Law and that kind of thing.*

CB: But I look at the intermediate level. I use the term from Jurgen Lingen, a scholar of literature. I use the term inter-discourse. These are discourses that try to break down expert discourses into everyday life. For example, talk shows. They get an expert to talk about things that somehow keep society busy, they are pressing social questions, and they try to solve them to propose solutions and to make it intelligible for people in everyday life. And this is the example I uses in the presentation today. There's one show that was produced by a German TV news outlet. And by the end of 2015 had started and the production went on until the beginning of 2016. The programme is called *Marhaba Ankommen in Deutschland* which means basically, "Hello, welcome to Germany". And it's a programme with roughly 18 episodes. And each episode has about 5 minutes. And the aim of the show is to explain Germany to the refugees, basically.

CC: *Let's hear a little bit from that show:*

[Music followed by Arabic language]

CC: *So what's going on here?*

CB: Well, he's basically saying, in Arabic, that personal freedom is very important in Germany. They have personal choices and among this is that you can choose whatever sexual orientation you would like and that everybody has to respect it. It portrays this as how things are done in Germany, basically.

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CC: *Fantastic. So . . . and this is fairly typical of the programme?*

CB: This is very typical, yes. One part always establishes what he thinks is typical of Germany and what he thinks refugees – so-called refugees – need to know, because they don't know them yet. He insinuates, "I tell you now, because you probably don't know, but you need to know that when you come here." So that means: those coming from Syria, from Afghanistan, they don't know anything about choice, freedom and so forth, because their societies are oppressed. This is the insinuation. And then there are some episodes, some sections in the episodes where he talks with the expert. Why they are experts we don't know. But he talks with them on a deeper . . . . Sometimes they are psychologists. There was also a lawyer in one episode. And some episodes we don't get to know what their occupation is. We just get to know the name. So it's interesting. He doesn't feel a need to explain why he's talking to this specific person over this specific topic. (**15:00**)

CC: *Excellent. So what we have here is sort of a national discourse, in some way, on the refugee being channelled through this individual, this television programme. And directly speaking to people who are coming in.*

CB: Yes. He's addressing them directly – also, linguistically. He's saying [in Arabic,] "*You*": "*You* will have to this, and this, and then everything will work fine." Right? And the load, or the burden is put on the refugees because they now know how they have to behave. "So please behave like this and then we don't have any problem!" It's a crash course in, I don't know, in integration.

CC: *Yes. I mean, God forbid that the host society would have to change as well!*

CB: Well, the interesting thing is that it tells us a lot about how we imagine ourselves as Germans, right? When he talks about "the Germans" there is no ambiguity. There's no contradiction. It's all clear, basically. It's easy to decipher, right? "We support sexual freedom, do this and this." But this is really not the case. This is a discourse we are having about ourselves. We imagine ourselves.

CC: *I'm just going to interrupt your flow a little bit to . . . Do we know, are refugees actually watching these? Have you found that out in your fieldwork? Have people encountered them? And how are they encountering them?*

CB: Well, if you look at YouTube you'll see that refugees comment in Arabic on the show. I haven't analysed those yet, but I have found them. And it's interesting material, I think, looking at the

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comments. And also during my fieldwork. I did fieldwork in a church where a group of six refugees had asked for asylum. It's called "church asylum" in Germany – sanctuary. They were under threat of deportation to Bulgaria. So they had passed . . . while fleeing Syria they had passed through Bulgaria and got registered there with their fingerprints. And, arriving in Germany, they were not eligible for applying for asylum here because they had been registered in the EU, in Bulgaria, elsewhere. So they would have been sent back. So, their last chance to stay in Germany was to go into a church asking for church asylum. Because then, the police officers don't enforce the deportation. They don't go into the premises of the church. It's like a tolerated agreement between the church and the state, basically. It's not a law. It's not written in law somewhere. It's an agreement. It's also the Church then that takes over the asylum procedure. They provide lawyers to the refugees. They interact with the State authorities. So that's the construct of it. So, in the neighbourhood where I lived in Hannover, I heard that there were six refugees in a Protestant church there who had asked for church asylum. They had been granted church asylum and I thought, "Oh that's a good opportunity to go there!" Because I also studied Arabic in Syria, so I know Syrian Arabic. And I know Syria quite well from all my travels there. So I also felt it would be good to be there. So I became also sort-of an intermediary between the volunteers of the church in the neighbourhood – a volunteer group formed in order to support them – and the Syrians who were in the church at the time. They were not allowed to leave the premises. As soon as you step out of the premises and you are caught by a police officer, you are gone. The church cannot protect you anymore. The power of the church ends there.

CC: *Yes, that's really like going into a national embassy in that.*

CB: Yes.

CC: *So you, I'm sure, are going to have some examples that you weren't able to give in your presentation from your ethnographic work. You also, then . . . you've been taking this discourse that's being propounded particularly in . . .*

CB: Oh yes, the programme, yes.

CC: *And you set up, what was it called? "Chains of equivalence"?*

CB: I encountered the programme, I got to know the programme while I was volunteering in church asylum – this was the story behind it. Because one of the men who were also volunteering in the church asylum, he was a retired German teacher and he taught German to the refugees, and he used the

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programme for his classes. And I know a few refugees who know it at least, and who have looked at it. And it was also given the Grimme-Preis which is like a prestigious German TV award, which just shows the standing of it. At least from the German side.

CC: *Yes!*

CB: Well, what I've done with the 18 episodes, I watched them several times, and I tried to see how they construct what you've been hinting at, chains of equivalence. (**20:00**) This is a term I got from Laclau. It means that you look, basically, how are different categories labels put on an equal footing, linked, with reference to a third category. So how was . . . You look for how A and B are equivalent, in reference to C.

CC: *OK.*

CB: And this is what I did with the episodes. And what became quite clear, right from the start, is that there are two main categories that are the reference categories for everything that's constructed. There's the German society and then there's the society of the refugees. And since this is mainly about Germany, the German society plays the main role in the episode. And the refugee societies – they're assumed to be Arabic, because they're addressed to Arabic speakers. And they're assumed to be Muslim. So this is what we get to know about this. There are some more markers where they explicitly characterise societies as sexually oppressed, violent. There are a few that the host, Constantin Schreiber, mentions a few times: violence against children and women in these societies and "this is not tolerated in Germany and is sanctioned by law". Something the refugees need to know in case they want to engage in that! (Laughs).

CC: *Yes.*

CB: So this is what we get to know about refugees – the societies of the refuges. And then he uses all different terms and concepts in order to flesh out what German society is all about. And the main terms that really keep reoccurring on the German side is "secular", and the "German constitution" – a kind of constitutional patriotism that's going on there: a foundation of the German constitution that's there and makes sure that we are secular, and democratic and so on. And then on the other side, the refugees' society is contrasted to it. So *we* have the secularity *here*, we are secular here, *they* are Muslim- *there* is Islam. And this is explicitly done in statements and so on. So "secular/ Islam" is one contrast. And then you have the "constitution" and "Sharia" – although they're really different

concepts, totally different categories that cannot really compare, but he does it! So the viewer gets the impression that the Sharia is just a positive law put into law books, that you can look at and then you know what it is all about. But it's not.

CC: *Exactly.*

CB: So then, in the rest, you can see how he fleshes out what secular is. And there it gets interesting, because most of us think it maybe comes up as something like, it's a separation of state and religion or state institutions and religious institutions. He mentions this only once without going further into it. What he mentions all the time when he talks about secular democratic society is rights and freedom, individual rights and freedom. And there are two rights that he mentions in particular which is freedom of religion, and sexual rights. And this is I find very intriguing, that the secular is then boiled down to two freedom and rights discourses, but in particular a freedom of religion and sexual rights. This is how he constructs these equivalences, all geared toward "This is the German society".

CC: *Excellent. And so this is all very esoteric in the sense that we're talking about what's being said in programme. But how does this, how is it playing out on the ground as it were, in your experiences with your research participants?*

CB: And this is really what interests me, right? How does the truth, which is established at the discursive level, then play out in everyday life? And interact? And how it's shaped? Well I'm starting to sift through my data and I've seen a few things that come up on a regular basis. One thing is that the discourse of secular Germany is there to ensure that we have the freedom of choice, that we have a choice and that we can fulfil our desires, which I find really interesting . . . that there's a task: that the aim of secularism is to do that. I see this in certain instances, for example. One example I used during my presentation was interaction between me and a woman from the volunteer group, I call her Anna (**25:00**). And she was thinking about engaging romantically with a Syrian – who was not part of the group in the church asylum, but she knew him from elsewhere. But she was taking me as an expert on Islam and wanted to know, and had questions about it. Because she said that this friend of hers said that if he ever wanted to have a girlfriend or to marry, this woman should be covered, wear a headscarf, just a normal headscarf. And at the beginning I didn't understand the problem she had, because I thought, "OK, fine, so he's saying this to you, you're not in any relationship with him, so that should be fine." But she really wanted him to step back from this – not to make this choice, right? She wanted to ensure that he would make a different, a better choice. And so she was asking me about

anything from religious tradition that she could use to convince him that this is not "good" Islam that he is doing there. Anything she could use strategically, basically. Because she didn't want to accept his choice. So, I mean, there is a discourse of choice. But some things are taken out of . . . There are somethings that you cannot choose, that are taken out of the range of options that you have, like covering. And this occurred really often. There were a lot of discussions about covering and headscarves and so on. For example, there were often discussions, people were discussing with one of the women . . . . There was one woman only in the group of the six Syrians who were asking for asylum in the church. She had never worn a headscarf in her life, neither in Syria nor in Germany. For her it was not a big deal, nothing special. But people kept asking her, "Why are you not wearing a headscarf here? For sure, it must be because you are in Germany right now, and you have the choice? Where as in Syria you didn't have the choice." And she just tried to make sure, against all the odds, "No I didn't wear a headscarf in Syria either." But people didn't really want to believe this. And there was a man from the volunteer group – this was also one instance of engaging her in conversation on her headscarf and he was supportive of her choice, "Yes it's a good choice you are making not wearing the headscarf, because how could you otherwise be phrased as participating in society and being yourself, if you were wearing a headscarf? How can you be a valid participant in society when you wear a headscarf and cover up? So, again, this is not a part of the secular choice, technically.

CC: *Well, secularity allows "good" religion space . . .*

CB: Yes. It's never differentiated, but this is the idea behind it, right? So there is also the idea that the secular encompasses religion. And this is what people also phrase, right? "That we have here religion – it's part of our makeup. It's not a problem, because we still have the choice. Religion doesn't have to interfere with it."

CC: *As long as it doesn't interfere with liberal secular principals.*

CB: As long as it doesn't interfere with the sexual rights or the freedom to choose your faith or your lifestyle, or whatever. And what we see then, if you look at how it's contrasted with Islam, it's not that the secular and religious contrast, but that the secular and religion on one side is contrasted with Islam on the other side. So Islam is not yet in the realm of the secular and the religious. And this I find very intriguing. Maybe that's particular to Germany. I'm not sure. I would have to look at other societies, how it's spelt out there. But I find it very interesting that the religious is part of the make-up, obviously, of German secular society. It's accepted. Islam, not yet. This is why Islam has to reform to

change, which means giving way to all the choices. Making sure you can make the sexual choices you want to make, all the lifestyle choices and so on. But you must never take a choice that might be considered Islamic or Muslim. That's the interesting thing, right? Being Muslim, in a stereotypical sense, is not part of the choice, right? Not there.

CC: *Exactly, yes. Because when one makes a Protestant choice one doesn't – we don't talk about that.*

CB: It's also interesting, the episodes of the TV programme, when they symbolise religion visually, it's not Protestantism. It's totally neutered. It never talks about Protestantism, neither discursively nor when he's talking, it isn't mentioned visually. It's not depicted visually. He talks about Catholicism, Judaism and Islam and that's also what is portrayed visually. (**30:00**) Protestantism is not there. It's the default position, right? It's neutered.

CC: *Harmless.*

CB: Harmless, yes.

CC: *OK. And I should just say we've had to have the windows open because it's so warm in here, so I hope the Listeners are enjoying the slight birdsong that's making its way in.*

CB: (Laughs).

CC: *Just to get towards wrapping up here. That's been some excellent examples from your ethnographic work, and also tying it into the broader national discourse through the vehicle of this TV programme. But, I guess, if I were to force you to come up with some conclusions about the religious and the secular and the construction of refugees in Germany, where would you go?*

CB: Yes. Well first of all, I have to mention I didn't look for any notions of the secular and the religious at the beginning when I was doing research. It just came up to me, because people were using this terminology, right? From media polemical terms, basically, people identified . . . . So for me they're not the critical categories I use. What I've seen – and this is an argument I'm putting up – is that in this dispositive of the refugee we have the notions of the secular and the religious that are constructed there, and are implemented into everyday life. But they're normative of course, right? They're not neutral. And they're also inserted into interaction. And this is where it comes to shaping subjectivities, right? Because for example the Syrians at Church, they were constantly being

confronted with a secular idea of being an individual – a secular conceptualisation of subjectivity. And they were more or less subtly asked to adapt to it, to internalise it. And I think this is very interesting when you look in terms of power effect. This is how power is inserted into life, into micro-politics, basically. Power is not something abstract that somehow defines discourses and is established in discourses, but it also trickles down into everyday life.

CC: *Yes. The norms of conduct and the things that are censured. And all those unspoken rules, which – actually, this programme is ending up speaking the unspoken rules in many ways.*

CB: Yes. They're fleshing it out for you so you can just take an easy lesson with you and know what you have to do. So this is where I've seen my fieldwork so far – this was my focus so far: how, through interactions with the Syrians, and the volunteers, and the specific setting, specific secular subjectivities are inserted into their Muslim subjectivities. They have to be Muslim in a secular-specific way – a secular-Protestant-specific way – in order to become part of German society, in order to be here. And what further interests me in my fieldwork – and this is what I will be doing in the coming months – is to see how the other side handles this. Basically, they are presented with subject positions. And they have to somehow deal with them, negotiate them. Either they try to resist consciously or just adapt a bit, internalise a bit, usually it's much more ambiguous and not so clearly seen. But it's interesting to see what they do with it. What I noticed in my fieldwork is that these six who I was seeing quite a lot – and I'm still in contact and see them around, like at bases – they're insecure about how to behave, basically. Because they're totally decentred right now. All these demands are put on to them and they don't see what the difference is between them and what is demanded of them. They don't seem to be properly adapted. And for them it's very difficult to wrap their head around. Some of the men even ask me, "Carmen, when I'm working on the street, am I allowed to look women in the face? Is that indecent?" Especially after the events in Cologne, with the assaults on the women in New Year's Eve. And the entire discourse that came out of the debate afterwards. They said, "If I see women, had I better cross the street to not be offensive?" So for some it's really difficult – who are conscious of the sort- of, yes, antagonisms going on there – how to deal with it in their daily lives; how to behave properly; not to be seen as an outsider or as a predator, for example. **(35:00)**

CC: *Exactly.*

CB: So they have to find new scripts, basically, for how to behave properly. And this can be done by negotiating but also on a more subconscious level, I think. So I'm trying to get at this whole level of

micro-politics.

CC: *That's fantastic. Well, we are out of time, so we are going to have to stop it there. But it's excellent to hear of such rigorous empirical work being done with this sort of critical discourse/ analytical power angle. A lot of times empirical work . . .*

CB: It lacks that.

CC: . . . *lacks that, so it's really good to hear. So thank you very much, Carmen Becker.*

CB: Well, thank you for having me!

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