The observation of the unobservable: ideas of afterlife in a sociological perspective

Abstract:

Afterlife is situated in a transcendent sphere and therefore it is an object of imagination and not of experience. According to Niklas Luhmann the social function of religion is to make the difference between observable/unobservable observable. This observation can only be made from an inner-worldly perspective. We argue that the contents of the belief in an afterlife are determined by the experiences made in this world and by the interpretational patterns offered by religious traditions as well as sciences. Believers and non-believers interpret everyday life experiences by picking up and adapting religious or theological concepts (like heaven or reincarnation) or scientific explanations (like the decay of corpses). Based on group discussions with welfare benefit recipients and people with unsecure jobs, the article examines how people react when they are asked what in their opinion will come after death. It shows that the discussions about this question are determined by one's social position and the perception of one's perspectives and limits, the fears, the hopes and the suffering in this world. The article refers to findings of a research at the University of Leipzig on "Worldviews in Precarious Conditions of Life".

Keywords: *Afterlife, death and dying, sociology of religion, worldviews, qualitative research, group discussions, Niklas Luhmann.*