Religion and the Secular in Eastern Germany, 1945 to the present
Studies in Central European Histories

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Religion and the Secular in Eastern Germany, 1945 to the present

Edited by
Esther Peperkamp
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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments .................................................................................... vii
Notes on Contributors .............................................................................. ix
Map of eastern Germany .......................................................................... xi

Introduction ........................................................................................................ 1
  Esther Peperkamp and Malgorzata Rajtar

1. Science as Religion: The Role of Scientism in the
  Secularization Process in Eastern Germany ........................................ 19
  Thomas Schmidt-Lux

2. Secular Rituals and Political Commemorations in the GDR,
  1945–1956 ............................................................................................ 41
  Nikolai Vukov

3. The Limits of Politicization of the Schools in the GDR:
   The Catholic Eichsfeld Region and the Protestant
   Erzgebirge – A Comparison ............................................................. 61
   Kirstin Wappler

4. Positions and Pathways of Families within the Religious
   Field of East Germany: Three Catholic Case Studies .................... 87
   Uta Karstein

5. Between Menschlichkeit and Missionsbefehl: God, Work,
   and World among Christians in Saxony .......................................... 107
   Esther Peperkamp

6. Religious Socialization in a Secular Environment: Jehovah’s
   Witnesses in Eastern Germany .......................................................... 125
   Malgorzata Rajtar

7. Young Eastern Germans and the Religious and Ideological
   Heritage of their Parents and Grandparents .................................. 147
   Anja Frank
8. The Rehabilitation of Ex-Offenders in Eastern Germany: A Religious-Secular Configuration................................................167
   Irene Becci

9. Church Buildings in Eastern Germany: Houses of God or Tourist Attractions?..............................................................189
   Anja Körs

Conclusion: Dealing with Two Masters’ Commands – Explorations of the Complexities of Religious Life under a Dictatorial Regime.........................................................209
   Monika Wohlrab-Sahr

Index ........................................................................................................................................................................... 221
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Map of eastern Germany

- **national capital**: ○
- **national border**: - - -
- **federal state capital**: ●
- **town of interest**: •
- **FEDERAL STATE BORDER**: --
- **REGION**: REGION
- **former GDR border (until 1990)**: ---

*cartography: Jutta Turner*  
Peter L. Berger, once a proponent of secularization theory, now proclaims that “the world today (...) is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever” (1999, 2). However, when looking at the current situation in eastern Germany, almost twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, one may be tempted to describe it as the “vanguard society” of secularism – in opposition to Berger’s characterization of America as the “vanguard society of religious pluralism” (2002, 9). After 40 years of life under a socialist regime, the majority of eastern Germans (70%), Czechs (65%), and to a lesser degree Estonians (58%) no longer believe in God, and would not call themselves religious. Moreover, for most of them religion does not play an important role in their lives (Müller 2008, 68; Pickel 2000, 216; Pollack 2000, 40–41). Hence, countries and regions such as eastern Germany, the Czech Republic, and Estonia present a problem for scholars of religion. Their attempts to explain the lack of a religious revival and their approach to the issue of secularization using standard sociological indicators (e.g. declining church affiliation, worship attendance, participation in religious rituals, and the growth of alternative religious practices) are based on models with universalistic claims and are tested on the basis of quantitative data. While this can indeed yield interesting results, when it comes to explaining the process of how religion loses or retains its significance, these models do not in fact yield satisfying answers.

By all measures mentioned above, secularization in eastern Germany would indeed seem to be a fact of life. The figures for church membership and attendance, participation in lifecycle rituals, and beliefs in God and an afterlife all suggest that eastern Germans have little affinity for religion. On the other hand, certain observations can provide more

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1 Although Berger admits that “the very vortex of this European secularity may be located in eastern Germany and in the Czech Republic” (2002, 10), he is nonetheless more interested in the global resurgence of religion than in explaining this “anomaly.”
nuance to this state of affairs. Parishes may be small, but the small communities of believers are often close-knit and very active in their immediate surroundings. And new communities continue to develop: The global wave of Pentecostalism has not passed eastern Germany unnoticed. Recently, a former supermarket in Leipzig was transformed into a church for the evangelical *Hoffnungszentrum* (‘center of hope’) community, a very symbolic act indeed for those believers who regard consumerism as the main moral threat to modern society. Pastors and laity alike are also actively engaged in public discourse. Every evening, a local radio station in the state of Saxony-Anhalt broadcasts a message expressed by a spokesperson of one of the churches, while another regional radio station broadcasts a church service every Sunday, both exotic initiatives in an extremely secularized society. Furthermore, religion plays an important and visible role in the public sphere through charity organizations and social assistance, functions that are supported by the state. One may argue that these phenomena are marginal in comparison with the general trend of secularization, but they also draw attention to the fact that secularization, the secular, and religion may mean different things and take on different forms in different societies.

When it comes to explaining the process of how religion loses or retains its significance, existing theories and models do not provide satisfying answers. The most common explanations view either the socialist past or larger scale processes of modernization to be the cause of eastern German secularization. The former regards secularization as a top-down implementation of communist regimes that were inherently hostile to religion, contrary to Western Europe where secularization was regarded as a spontaneous process. Meulemann, a German sociologist, for example, speaks explicitly of ‘forced secularization’ (Meulemann 1996). He even attempts to reach a final verdict concerning the importance of repression in contrast with the ongoing processes of secularization, the origins of which can be traced to the period before the founding of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). On the basis of the unchanged differences between East and West Germany with regard to the answers to certain survey questions, he concludes that secularization has been the result of the communist dictatorship (Meulemann 2003). One of the problems with this thesis is that it is not particularly easy to manipulate people in such a way that they abandon their convictions and practices (see, for instance, the case of Poland). This leads to another conclusion concerning eastern Germany, that
Proponents of the latter thesis are convinced that the GDR did indeed provide strong impetus to secularization, but that secularization would have occurred anyway (Höllinger 1995, 114). They point to various significant developments preceding the founding of the GDR. It has been emphasized that the weakening of church structures, including church associations (Vereine), seminaries, and religion classes in schools, had already begun in the Nazi era (Nowak 1996). In a way, it was the National Socialist policies that began to be implemented in 1933 that would pave the way for the Socialist Unity Party’s (SED) policies to succeed after the war.

What is more, secularizing tendencies have been traced back to the 19th century within the Protestant Church as well (Nowak 1996, 24ff; Pollack 1999). According to Pollack, “in the nineteenth century ties with the church were already extremely weak in large parts of central Germany. Segments of the working classes and even quite a number of country people had developed a ‘let-us-be-Christians-without-going-to-church’ approach, a kind of inner secularization while remaining church members and continuing to rely on christening, wedding, and burial rituals” (Pollack 1999, 166). In some regions, for instance in Saxony, a decline in religiosity began even well before the advance of industrialization, in the 18th century (Nowak 1996, 25). In the process, an East-West divide could be identified as early as 1910 (Hölscher 2001, 7, based on church statistics). Nevertheless, criticizing the idea of secularization as directly related to industrialization, rationalization, and technical progress, Pollack observes that when “[l]ooking at sociostructural differences, the western German states, on account of their higher degree of modernization, ought to be far more secularized and dissociated from the church on the whole than eastern Germany. However, the contrary is true” (Pollack 1999, 164). This again casts doubt on the modernization thesis.

Many contemporary scholars of religion agree that “the search for some ‘master factor’ cause of secularization is mistaken” (Bruce 1992, 4). Others, like Asad, emphasize that “a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable” (Asad 2003, 1). In general, in contemporary studies about secularization, the idea that the processes of secularization and modernization are interlinked has mostly been abandoned. As Berger has noted: “We must give up the idea that modernity and a decline of
religion are inexorably linked phenomena. (...) I had to give it up under the sheer pressure of empirical data” (Berger 2002, 9–10). Many social historians also reject the thesis of modernization outright (e.g. Brown 2001, McLeod 1997). If one agrees, as we do, with Wohlrab-Sahr that the process of secularization in the GDR “was neither a simple process of repression nor a simple process of modernization” (Wohlrab-Sahr et al. 2008, 136), what alternatives remain? To phrase it differently: leaving aside macro-narratives about modernization and repression as unsatisfactory in the context of eastern Germany, where should we look for more fruitful explanations?

To arrive at a better understanding of processes of religious change, we argue that one should focus on the place where the changes occur: in the interplay between local bureaucracies and individual lives. This resembles Lüdtke’s ‘history of everyday life’ (Alltagsgeschichte). He remarks that “the historiography of everyday life wishes to illuminate the forms of mediation – and the discrepancies – between orientational patterns (‘mode of life’) and the forms of daily behavior and experiencing (‘everyday life’)” (Lüdtke 1995, 15). He further writes that “what is required is an exact more ‘profound’ and probing look at social situations and relations, as well as their intertwinnings and rhythms of change” (Lüdtke 1995, 20). Thus, only by contextualising individual choices can one gain insight into how religious meaning is produced, reproduced, contested, discontinued, and disrupted. What, for example, is the consequence of becoming and/or being a religious minority in an a-religious society? How is religion experienced and expressed in such a situation? How did established and minority religions cope with the secular state? And how successfully was the atheistic state-ideology implemented in local arrangements introduced to constrain religious people? If modernization has generally been considered a cause of secularization, and Protestantism has been regarded as the harbinger of modernization, how do these processes work out at the level of the individual? These are the questions to be addressed in this volume.

While personal and family biographies as well as close-up looks at organizations can provide an intimate account of religion, the effort to arrive at general explanations is not being abandoned in favor of micro-studies nor should this imply a “retreat into the particular or to a narrow segment of social reality” (Eley 1995, x). It is instead argued that if “…we take the ‘bottom line’ of secularization to be changes in the religious beliefs and behaviour of individuals, we have to build our general explanations of secularization on a more detailed knowledge
of religious belief and behaviour than we have at present” (Bruce 1992, 6). This volume is also founded on this assumption.

Taken as a whole, the volume attempts to discover historically variable reconfigurations of religion and the secular at the local level. For, as Asad rightly points out, “it is common knowledge that religion and the secular are closely linked both in our thought and in the way they have emerged historically. Any discipline that seeks to understand ‘religion’ must also try to understand its other” (2003, 22). With this volume, including contributions from sociologists, anthropologists, and historians, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of the nature of religion and of processes of religious change in eastern Germany.

RELIGION IN EASTERN GERMANY – SOME FACTS AND FIGURES

The geographical definition ‘eastern Germany’ evokes a wide range of political, social, and religious connotations. As an area, it is indeed part of Germany, and as such situated at the heart of Europe. It is composed of the states (Länder) of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Brandenburg, Berlin, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia. These are indeed the states that once constituted the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany), with all the geopolitical ramifications as part of the socialist Eastern Bloc in opposition to the capitalist West.

With regard to religion, eastern Germany is situated right at the center of numerous fundamental changes in religion that have swept across the continent, indeed forming the very heartland of Protestantism. Martin Luther himself was born in Eisleben – now known as Lutherstadt Eisleben – a small city in Saxony-Anhalt. Luther’s famous 95 theses were found nailed to the door of the All Saints’ Church (Schlosskirche) in Wittenberg – now known as Lutherstadt Wittenberg – in Saxony-Anhalt as well. On the eve of the founding of the GDR on October 7, 1949, 81 percent of East Germans belonged to a Protestant church, while a further 11 percent were Catholic. The radical changes in this regard (e.g. church membership and church attendance) in the course of forty years of a socialist system have led to many debates on the influence of socialism.

Ideologically, religion was alien to the idea of a ‘developed socialist society’ (entwickelte sozialistische Gesellschaft), as the GDR saw itself (Daiber 1988, 76). Its leading ideology of Marxism-Leninism was to permeate the everyday lives of its citizens. A fundamental critique of
religion was connected with the ideological premise that, with the advance of communism, religion was necessarily and automatically expected to die out and disappear. Furthermore, it was expected that religion would not be able to operate as an autonomous entity in the society (Hoffmann 2000). With ‘communist man’ still in the making, religion had to be perceived as a ‘private thing’ in order to prevent the working class from splitting into Christians and atheists (Hoffmann 2000, 27). In Alfred Hoffmann’s words, “religion was depicted here not only as something subjective, but also as a reality that has no positive relation to the actual political struggle” (2000, 43). Churches constituted in his words a “borderline case”: their self-understanding as established and legitimized by God and/or Christ removed them from the direct ideological influence of Marxism-Leninism right from the beginning (Hoffmann 2000, 16; Daiber 1988; Davidson-Schmich et al. 2002). Nonetheless, according to the first GDR constitution of 1949, which was based in many respects on the Weimar constitution, the existence of religious communities was in fact protected (Daiber 1988, 77; Weber 2000, 28–29), while the country’s second constitution of 1968 officially declared the separation of church and state. The amended constitution of 1974 departed from acknowledging religious communities as public law corporations (Körperschaften des öffentlichen Rechts) and merely maintained guarantees of the rights of individuals to practice religion. The socialist state and its ruling party, the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands; Socialist Unity Party of Germany), did not, however, feel particularly constrained by the constitution, and members of religious communities were persecuted, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, the period that saw the stabilization of the state system and the entrenchment of single-party rule. The SED was legally able to prosecute all of its opponents and any form of opposition drawing on what would become the infamous Article 6 of the 1949 Constitution that classified as criminal acts not only the “religious and racial hatred and hatred against other peoples, militaristic propaganda and warmongering as well as any other discriminatory acts”, but additionally and most fatefully, the “boycott of democratic institutions or organizations” (Weber 2000, 29). These included churches. Small numbers of protestant pastors and laity would in fact be interned.2 As early as 1950, a show trial of Jehovah’s Witness leaders

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2 In a wave of arrests in the early 1950s, about 70 staff members and several young people active in church youth organizations (Junge Gemeinde) were arrested.
and the ban of the organization was already brought about on the back of accusations of attempting to boycott the state, proceeded by massive media propaganda presenting them as an ‘American-influenced sect’. Shortly thereafter other religious communities, such as Christian Scientists and Pentecostals were banned as well (Davidson-Schmich et al. 2002, 345). Abstaining from political or union activity, rejecting public referenda or elections, refusing to perform military service, and openly practicing one’s religion were all actions that attracted the special attention of the SED.

The SED policy was not only aimed at matters such as limiting religion to the private sphere, but first and foremost at actively shaping the public sphere and life of its citizens. Because school was considered “a traditionally privileged place of religious socialization” (Nowak 1996, 31), education constituted “perhaps the most important battlefield between church and state” (Thériault 2004, 92). In the eyes of the party officials, education was an instrument for instituting socialism and creating a ‘new man’ (Thériault 2004, 90). The state established its monopoly on education through the implementation of laws on the democratization of the German school in 1946, and the socialist reformation/reorganization of school system (sozialistische Umgestaltung des Schulwesens) in 1958, the upshot of which was that religion was banned from schools.

In 1954, the ritual of Jugendweihe was introduced. By drawing on older traditions, the state reintroduced a coming of age ritual for fourteen-year-old pupils that was to compete with and eventually replace the Christian ritual of confirmation. According to Barbara Thériault, “the school constituted the ‘epicenter’ of the party-state propaganda, as the arena where Marxism-Leninism was professed, the Jugendweihe celebrated, and party youth organizations (the Young Pioneers, the Ernst Thälmann Pioneers, and the FDJ) met” (2004, 90). In 1950 the Young Pioneers already counted 1.6 million, while the FDJ or Free German Youth, the SED career launching pad, had 1.5 million members (Weber 2000, 35).

Not taking part in the Jugendweihe and openly practicing their religion meant not only disadvantages in their education and professional lives but also social stigmatization and exclusion for Christians. This has had a profound influence on church membership. According to Pollack, a German sociologist of religion, an enormous decrease in church membership coincides with the period of the most severe political repression and greatest discrimination against Christians in the second half of the 1950s (Pollack 1999, 165).
The state authorities would, however, begin to adopt a more tolerant policy once the political system stabilized and the SED secured its ruling position (e.g. through the control of mass organizations, media, education, and culture). This was also facilitated by a series of meetings between the representatives of the Protestant churches and the authorities. Beginning in the 1970s, state repression was replaced, to a great degree, with tolerance and acceptance, especially with regard to the Protestant churches. The German historian Hermann Weber thus writes of relations normalizing between the state and the Protestant churches (2000, 98), while Karl-Fritz Daiber speaks of “pragmatically-oriented critical cooperation” between the two (1988, 78). According to Daiber (1988, 86), despite the ideological differences and the persecution of religion in any organized form, the socialist state aimed at making religious communities and their activities useful, including for instance the social work of the Protestant (Diakonie) and Catholic (Caritas) diaconal agencies. In doing so, it admitted the stabilizing function of religion in certain societal domains (Daiber 1988, 87–88). On the other hand, as Daphne Berdahl writes: “By permitting a certain degree of dissent in this area – and granting it the semblance of resistance – the state was more effectively able to permeate and control other spheres of daily life” (1999, 48). Interestingly, the SED leadership even turned to religious motifs in German history in the 1980s as a means of gaining broader social support, even as they emptied them of their religious meaning. Martin Luther and his working ethos (Arbeitsethos) was, for example, presented as an example to be followed. 1983 was in fact declared Luther Year in commemoration of the 500th anniversary of his birth (Daiber 1988, Weber 2000).

To a large extent, the GDR state policy affected Protestants and Catholics to a similar extent: members of both churches were faced with the difficulty of making choices for example with regard to Jugendweihe and confirmation. Institutionally, however, the Protestant and the Catholic churches opted for different positions. Meetings between representatives of the Protestant churches and the state authorities that took place in the late 1950s, and especially later in 1978, brought about greater respect on the part of the Protestant churches for the development of socialism and the peaceful building of society. In 1969, the Protestant churches of the GDR formally separated from their West German counterparts and formed their own federation: the BEK (Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR, “Federation of Protestant Churches in the GDR”). The Protestant
churches have been referred to in this regard as ‘the church in socialism’, whereas the role of the much smaller Roman Catholic Church has been described as the ‘church of silence’ (see Thériault 2004). While agreeing to work with the socialist state provided the Protestant churches with more room to maneuver, it would, after German unification, lead to charges of collaboration. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, withdrew into itself in its position as a double minority and avoided any active engagement (see Thériault 2004, Daiber 1988, Davidson-Schmich et al. 2002).

Not only the Protestant and Catholic churches, but religious minorities were also subject to the state’s policies. Close to the end of the GDR there were about 40 ‘small churches’ and other religious communities in the country, numbering some 243,000 in 1984, or about 1.5% of the East German population (Daiber 1984, 80). The situation of these religious communities varied. Policies towards minorities such as Mormons and Jews were rather conciliatory. The New Apostolic Church – considered to be the GDR’s third largest religious community (Gordon 1988) – maintained a particularly good relationship with the socialist state. The New Apostolic leaders not only welcomed every prevailing authority as being emplaced by God but also called on church members “to play their full part in society” (Gordon 1988, 33). Jehovah’s Witnesses, on the other hand, were banned in the GDR in August 1950, and only received legal recognition as a religious organization from the state several months after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in March 1990. The same happened to Christian Scientists (in November 1989) and Pentecostals.

**After 1989**

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 brought about many changes in the lives of East Germans, not only in a political or economic sense: The centrally planned monetary system was replaced by the West German market economy; the leadership of the SED and its virtually one-party rule was dismissed and East Germans were granted the freedom to join and vote for any political party they chose; and the borders were opened to the West. New opportunities and new challenges would ensue. Religion was yet another sphere that was affected: discriminatory measures disappeared, and new opportunities for public religious activity arose. Hence, a religious revival had been widely expected with
the end of the German Democratic Republic. In contrast to some Central and East European countries, however, a general religious revival measured by standard sociological indicators, including church attendance, a trust in the church, and a belief in God, has not in fact been found in post-1989 East Germany (Müller 2008, Pollack 2000). New religious movements were also unable to win over many new recruits after the Wende (as the political changes of 1989–1990 are known). Today, the region that once constituted a country in its own right is generally acknowledged as being “dechristianized” to a high degree (Seiwert 2003) or even “the most secularized region in the world” (Schmidt and Wohlrab-Sahr 2003, 86). In 1990, immediately following the country’s unification, only about 30% of population were members of established churches, 25% Protestant and about 4% Catholic (Pollack 2000, 19). In comparison, the number of non-religious persons, mostly atheists, increased from between 5% and 8% in 1950 to nearly 70% in 1990 (Pollack 2000, 19; Pickel 2000, 211).

There have been various explanations for this, two of which deserve closer attention in this volume: first, the importance of the specific role of the Protestant Church in the GDR, in particular before and during the unification period; and second, the complete alienation of East German citizens from religion.

First, being a member of a church was sometimes seen as a form of “indirect protest” during the socialist era (e.g. Pollack 2000, 42–43; Berdahl 1999). Churches were perceived in political terms both by the

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3 There are of course also countertendencies. Among the younger, post-GDR generation, one can find a growing interest in religion. The social profile of young church members challenges a general picture of the whole group. They are not only more engaged in church life and attend church services more often than their elder siblings but also – in contrast with their West German counterparts – are better educated than their nonreligious peers (Pollack 2000, Schmidt and Wohlrab-Sahr 2003). These countertendencies are usually not considered to be very significant because of the small numbers they involve, although McLeod, thinking of the role churches played in nourishing dissent in the 1980s, notes that “[t]he churches are tending to become the province of committed minorities, but, as the case of East Germany shows, committed minorities may exercise an influence out of all proportion to their numbers (McLeod 1981, 154).

4 In 2007 the number of members of Protestant and Catholic churches were as follows: Berlin (19.8% and 9.4% respectively), Brandenburg (17.8% and 3.1% respectively), Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (17.9% and 3.3% respectively), Saxony (20% and 3.6% respectively), Saxony-Anhalt (15.0% and 3.6% respectively), and Thuringia (25.1% and 7.9% respectively) (Evangelical Church in Germany, 2008).
state and its citizens. As the state’s only relatively independent entities, they attracted not only the religious but in fact offered a protected sphere for anti-state activists of all kinds, including advocates for human rights, peace, women’s issues, and the environment. The role played by the churches in the 1980s as political mediators thus resulted in a high degree of trust in the church (Pollack 2000, 28). This extraordinary position of the church in society was, however, lost following unification (Berdahl 1999, Pollack 2000). With an almost complete transfer of the West German legal church-state model to East Germany that gave the established churches numerous privileges and advantages from the ‘new’ German state (e.g. religious education at school, a church tax collected by the state), religion reemerged as a public and political issue (cf. Borneman 1993, Seiwert, 2003, Thériault, 2004). Churches were no longer seen as ‘alternative institutions’ and representatives of the society but instead as part of the victorious political system, and therefore less attractive (Pollack 2000, 44; cf. Davidson-Schmich et al. 2002).

Second, it has been emphasized that the educational and discriminatory policy of the socialist state combined with structural weaknesses of Protestantism resulted in a ‘culture of churchlessness’ (Kultur der Konfessionslosigkeit) in Eastern Germany (Pickel 2000, 207). This remains in sharp contrast to the ‘culture of church membership’ in West Germany (Zugehörigkeitskultur zur Kirche). As Schmidt and Wohlrab-Sahr put it, “whereas in West Germany to quit church membership is still a decision that requires explanation, in the East a culture of nonmembership and religious indifference has been established that actually makes the decision for church membership an act of nonconformity” (2003, 90; original italics). This nonmembership is, moreover, often perceived as a positively valued symbol of East German identity and one of very few links to the GDR past that have not yet been discredited (Pickel 2000, 215, 227–228).

The religious and the secular revisited

The frequently expressed surprise at the non-occurrence of a religious revival after the fall of socialism in the GDR reveals an underlying understanding of religion as a universal – transhistorical and transcultural – category, an understanding that has been rightly
criticized by Asad (1993). He argues that “... there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes” (1993, 29). A similar observation has also been made in relation to the debates on religion and the secular in 19th century Germany. Nowak points to the different meanings ‘statistical evidence’ can be given depending upon one’s perspective and interests (Nowak 1996). The mere existence of religious beliefs and sentiments among individuals, as recorded in large surveys, attests to an essentialist understanding of religion and tell us little about the influence that religion can have. The challenge therefore is not to conclude prematurely on what religion is, but to look at how it is embedded in the social, political, and economic contexts in which religion is shaped. In order to do this, one has to abandon the ‘large narratives’ of repression and modernization, as we have argued above.

Out of dissatisfaction with larger narratives, there has been, over the last decade, a rising interest in the personal histories and everyday lives of ordinary people, with studies that have led to interesting new insights. Brown, for example, argues that gender representations in Christian discourse are of key importance to understanding the changes in religion Great Britain of the 1960s. The changing role and position of women in society brought about the loss of hegemony and erosion of this Christian discourse (Brown 2001). Such studies have stimulated further research along these lines (cf. Van Rooden 2004 on the sudden religious decline in the Netherlands of the 1960s).

The focus on individuals in social contexts bears similarities to the German tradition of the ‘history of everyday life’ (Alltagsgeschichte) that its proponents conceive as “the history of everyday behavior and experience” (Lüdtke 1995, 6). In his foreword to a volume devoted to this approach, Eley argues that “[b]y explaining social history in its experiential or subjective dimensions (...) conventional distinctions between the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ might be transcended; a more effective way of making the elusive connections between the cultural and political realms may be found” (1995, viii).

Such an approach seems particularly useful with regard to the analysis of religion in the GDR and beyond, which hinges on the distinction between the public and private. Too often, the process of religious change has been understood in terms of repression, turning East Germans into victims of the regime. When looking at people’s experiences, however,
the picture can turn complicated, and may particularly reveal “the way in which participants were – or could become – simultaneously both objects of history and its subjects” (Lüdtke 1995, 6).

Ideas gain plausibility within the context of social relations and institutions (cf. Lüdtke 1995, 5). Schmidt-Lux (Chapter 1) takes up the question of how science could become a plausible alternative to religion. It is often assumed that the advance of science has been one of the causes of secularization, as it may seem that science successfully competes with religion over the answers to ultimate questions. Few contemporary secularization theorists would, however, agree with such a view. Bruce (2002) indeed argues that the intrinsic merits of an idea are only partly responsible for either its acceptation or rejection. Schmidt-Lux takes this critique seriously and shows in his contribution how a scientific worldview was propagated in the GDR through Urania, the Society for the Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge, in particular. The propagation of a scientific worldview was an important component of GDR politics and education as well as an attempt to delegitimize religion. In his contribution to this volume, Schmidt-Lux analyzes the concept of the scientific worldview (wissenschaftliche Weltanschauung) in the GDR as well as how Urania attempted to enter into competition with churches and religion. He also argues that in order to understand the outcomes of this conflict, one has to have a look into the actors involved. Biographical interviews show that there are different patterns in adopting a scientific worldview.

Uta Karstein (Chapter 4) focuses on the intermediary role of the family in the perception, transformation, and adaptation of doctrine. Her contribution to this volume clearly shows the distinction between the institutional policy of the Catholic Church referred to as the church of silence and the actual choices people made. She follows Wohlrab-Sahr (2008), who, as an alternative to ‘large narratives’, proposes to look at how competing interpretational frameworks acquired subjective plausibility for large parts of the population. With regard to the idea of repression in particular, she points out that conflicts on the macro-level “do not simply penetrate lifeworlds from above but always need an interpretative frame” (Wohlrab-Sahr et al. 2008, 129). Borrowing from Bourdieu, Karstein shows how particular choices result from one’s family habitus. This has less to do with what people believe than with the ways in and through which beliefs are translated into everyday life practices (i.e. the decision on whether or not to take part in state and/or church rituals, marriage, etc.).
Whereas Karstein focuses on the older generations, Anja Frank's contribution (Chapter 7) investigates younger age groups, which have shown slightly higher rates of religiosity in standard questionnaires (with items such as ‘belief in afterlife’, ‘belief in God’). Similar results for younger age groups have been reported for other countries as well (e.g. the Netherlands, Poland). Western Germany, however, despite a very small increase among the youngest age group surveyed (from 42.2% to 43.5%), continues to occupy the last position. While such findings have not usually been followed up with a closer look into the processes behind it, Frank takes up this challenge in her contribution. Building on Karstein’s argument on the central importance of the family, she shows how, among young eastern Germans, societal changes have interacted with their family heritage in molding certain aspects of their worldview.

The experiences of younger eastern Germans differ significantly from those of their parents and grandparents. While being young during the fall of socialism opened up many new opportunities for them, it also led to difficulties in carrying forth their parents’ ideological and religious heritage. As Wuthnow (1998) has pointed out, generations define themselves in contrast with previous generations. The rapidly changing circumstances in eastern Germany caused the younger generation to reflect upon their family heritage more than they may otherwise have done. The new societal constellations led to new alternatives, both secular and religious. In some cases even a role reversal took place, in which a younger generation became the authority for their parents and grandparents. Characteristic of this development is the detachment of religious ideas from concrete religions.

Aside from a mediating “interpretational framework” (Wohlrab-Sahr et al. 2008), one has to take into account that power – both symbolic and tangible – is executed and contested in local social and institutional arrangements. In this regard, it is useful to remember that these arrangements, as well as their underlying ideological framework, changed considerably over the forty years of the GDR. While the

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5 For example, the percentage of those 15–29 in the Netherlands that declared a belief in life after death rose from 43.1% to 53.8% between 1990 and 1999. The age group thereby changed from the lowest to highest ranking among the three age-groups surveyed (Source: World Values Survey). In Poland, Germany’s neighboring country to the east, a similar observation can be made for 15–29 year olds, who were second among age groups in 1990 at 71.4%, but first in 1999 at 84.9%.
Introduction

state, as a rule, strongly influenced the educational system, in practice, local arrangements provided considerable space for maneuver. Whereas the study by Thériault (2004) suggests that the state exerted complete control over education, Wappler (Chapter 3) shows how Christians – both Protestants and Catholics – could and in some cases did retain their influence over the school system. Although the state did indeed work toward secularizing education, Wappler evaluates how this attempt failed in the Eichsfeld region (the largest Catholic area in the GDR) while it succeeded in the Erzgebirge (a Protestant stronghold). She argues that the structure of the local religious and social spheres (a close-knit Eichsfeld community with a strong Catholic tradition and suspicious of new ideas, contrasted with the steadfastly Protestant Erzgebirge parishes surrounded by secularized areas with a different professional and social profile), and the aspirations of the state in relation to both regions (and indeed confessions) played a decisive role in the politicization of education and of public life in general.

Lüdtke’s argument that “the historical actors were (and are) more than mere blind puppets or helpless victims” (1995, 5), holds true not only for the Catholics and Protestants studied by Wappler. As the case of the Jehovah’s Witnesses examined by Rajtar (Chapter 6) shows, religious education was possible and continued even when religious minorities were persecuted. The Jehovah’s Witnesses were banned in 1950 as their evangelizing activities and indeed very presence were perceived as politically dangerous. The GDR kept Jehovah’s Witnesses’ activities under surveillance and put pressure on member families to raise their children according to socialist standards. Although non-compliance would result in educational and vocational obstacles, a socialization model of the Jehovah’s Witnesses that chiefly stressed loyalty to God prevailed, and the confession indeed remained a primary socialization agent among its member families.

Esther Peperkamp’s contribution to the volume (Chapter 5) also looks at how individual Christians dealt with the disadvantages they were faced with. Focusing on Christians who were or who became self-employed after the Wende, Peperkamp illustrates how the educational and professional hardships of her interviewees have influenced their professional lives and have affected the way they express and experience their religion. She shows how her interviewees avoid black-and-white descriptions when talking about their lives in the GDR, and how they place themselves in a narrative without their being either victims
or collaborators. The religion of those surveyed is a very human religion; they advocate humaneness (Menschlichkeit) in their contacts with others. This remains true even despite their religion’s great commission (Missionsbefehl) as human considerations take precedence over any obligation to proclaim their faith. Their own personal integrity and those of others thus take precedence over any religious authority. It is indeed characteristic of modern religiosity that subjects are the source of their own authority.

The Wende of 1989–1990 has played an important role in lives of East Germans, something that holds particularly true for ex-convicts. The rehabilitation of the former inmates examined by Becci (Chapter 8) underwent radical changes in both an institutional and a personal sense. Not only are political crimes and prisoners now a thing of the past, but a new philosophy of rehabilitation has also emerged, introducing religion as an important resource for rehabilitation alongside education and work. With new legal and political support, the churches thus began to play a role in this process that they could not play during the socialist era. This institutional strengthening of religious institutions went hand in hand with the withdrawal of the state from social functions, resulting, as Becci argues, in the complete reorientation of all actors involved in social assistance.

Finally, Anna Körs’ contribution to this volume (Chapter 9) evaluates church buildings as socially constructed objects that depend on individual perceptions of space. Comparing eastern and western German churches in the Baltic area, Körs argues that the meaning evoked by church buildings is not limited to their immediate function as places of worship for specific groups. She shows that, even if the churches do not have more than a handful of members, they nonetheless can and indeed do evoke positive connotations and feelings among the population as a whole in that they act as collectively shared symbols.

Instead of providing a new, unifying theoretical framework, the contributions to this volume depict historically varying reconfigurations of religion and secular life at the local level. The authors do not deny the results of survey studies that indicate the prevalence of secular attitudes and behaviors among eastern Germans. However, by focusing on local arrangements and individual and family life stories, they contribute to a more in-depth understanding of the religious and the secular in eastern Germany.
introduction

References


Davidson-Schmich Louise K., Klaus Hartmann and Uwe Mummert. 2002. You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t (always) make it drink: Positive freedom in the aftermath of German unification. Communist and Post-Communist Studies 35: 325–352.


Ten years after his acclamation as the antipope at an International Freethinkers Congress in Rome in 1904, Ernst Haeckel celebrated his 80th birthday. Haeckel had worked as a biologist at the University of Jena in the German state of Thuringia and was one of the leading followers of Charles Darwin. He popularized the theory of evolution in Germany and later became the founder and honorary president of the German *Monistenbund*, an organization that tried to create a new holistic worldview combining natural sciences and religion. At one point, Heinrich Schmidt, the General Secretary of the German *Monistenbund*, gave a speech in honor of Haeckel to mark his birthday, praising him as a man who had steadfastly held “the banner of freedom and progress.” “Tirelessly,” Haeckel had done away “with old mystic ideas of God, transcendence, and the undying soul” and helped to build up the “new temple of monism.” Haeckel was lauded as the “prophet of a new religion,” a religion, based on both scientific insight and an emotional perception of nature, “combining the True with the Good and the Beautiful into a new trinity” (Schmidt 1914, 21).

More than fifty years later, the president of the Society for the Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge in the GDR would say in a speech to the executives of the society:

Modern machines and ideas derived from the level of knowledge of a long surpassed era are incompatible and obstructive. Especially in West Germany, there have been several books on popular science that claim the existence of unrecognizable things und unsolvable problems exceeding the might and power of men. To cope with these phenomena, it is suggested that one should stick to the Bible, and thus to the old sayings and legends of primitive peoples. This means that the old thinking in the minds of our people is the ally of our enemies. If we want to do away with this burdensome thinking, it is not enough just to discuss it. Let us
replace the Old with the New. Let us present our scientific worldview in a more open manner, let us explain it more profoundly.\footnote{Meeting of the board on 27 April 1956, pp. 19f., in: SAPMO-BArch, DY 11/17.}

Although these two quotations are from fairly different periods in German history, they are evidence of a continuous movement, starting in the second half of the 19th century, in which numerous organizations engaged in the promotion of science as an explicit counterpart to, and substitute for, traditional religion. The movement took off in the institutions of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) during the entire period of the state’s existence. The term *Wissenschaftliche Weltanschauung* (‘scientific worldview’), for example, could be found in almost any official GDR document. While schools strongly supported the propagation of scientific knowledge and viewpoints, the Urania Society, a hugely popular scientific organization, was founded to bring science to the masses.

After 1989, the effects of the politics of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) towards the churches over the previous 40 years had become strikingly obvious. Eastern Germany is the most secularized region in the world, with less than 30 percent of the population belonging to any kind of church, and about half of the population considering themselves explicitly non-believing or atheist (see Schmidt and Wohlrab-Sahr 2003). I argue that this development was not only the result of political conflict, fought with repression and sheer power, but also an ideological conflict.\footnote{The political and repressive dimension of this conflict is very thoroughly researched by authors such as Dettlef Pollack (1994) or Horst Dähn (1993).} I will show that the institutional conflicts between churches and the state were intertwined with ideological conflicts, above all the devaluation of religion by *scientistic* arguments.\footnote{For a more detailed argumentation see Karstein et al. (2006, 2008) or Schmidt-Lux (2008).}

Even if many did not adopt the entire official ideology, some certainly agreed with the anti-religious dimensions of the *scientific worldview*. By contrasting the modern, rational, and reliable sciences with old, irrational, and speculative religion, individuals were not forced to justify the resignation of their church membership in a defensive manner. They could refer to arguments that justified their personal secularization as being reasonable and right in a cognitive dimension. Secularization was thus not only the result of impersonal processes or of state repression, but also the result of a conflict between rival views.
of the world. The extreme level of secularization in the GDR (Pollack 2000) can be explained at least in part by the success with which the SED propagated a worldview founded on the supremacy of science, which was seen as being in a necessary conflict with religion.

In the following paper, I present findings from my research that support this thesis. I recap, to begin with, how the relation between secular and religious organizations has been discussed within the sociology of religion from the 1800s through today. Secondly, I present a concise history of the secularist movement in Germany. I then outline the history of the Urania Society, which was the main object of my research before looking into the program and work of the Urania Society through the end of the GDR. Lastly, I sketch results from my own research and the findings of others to show how the promotion of scientism contributed to the East German process of secularization at the individual level.

**Science and scientism in theories of secularization**

The relation between science and religion and the consequences of this relation for the process of secularization have been debated by classical thinkers such as Auguste Comte (1933), James Frazer (1993), and Karl Marx (1971). Yet their conceptions have been rather non-analytical and teleological, instead viewing the secular (especially science) as being superior to religion as a matter of principle, with secular views of the world superseding religious ways of thinking in a rather automatic and self-fulfilling process.

Max Weber established another theoretical concept: Although he considered religion to be in conflict with secular spheres, especially science, this conflict was not the result of religious inferiority, but of a general process of rationalization and differentiation. As a result, religion was still an autonomous social sphere, but did not influence the spheres of law, politics, or science directly (see Wohlrab-Sahr 2007). Accordingly, Weber posited two possible conflicts between religion and science. While religion and science might disagree in the rational explanation of inner-worldly phenomena, both might offer different concepts of salvation to cope with the problems and contingencies of life (Weber 1988). Generally speaking, in the first case religion enters into the field of science, and in the second science becomes an agent within a traditionally religious field. According to Weber, the first case
was the greatest menace to religion. If religion argued in the same way, using the same arguments as science, religion would become indistinguishable from science. While science referred to reason and to knowledge of the world, religion would do best to consistently stress the “charisma of illumination” (Weber 1988, 566) and a normative position in the world.

Later scholars such as Bryan Wilson stressed influences such as industrialization and urbanization to explain the secularization processes of the 1950s and 1960s. Additionally, “the decline of western religion has been associated with the emergence of new and more powerful influences on the shape of western culture, in particular […] the growth of science and the development of the state” (Wilson 1982, 80). As religion claimed to provide explanations for both nature and society, religious ideologies were bound to collide with scientific interpretations. Losing these conflicts, the influence of religion in general began to wane. Referring to groups such as the previously mentioned Monistenbund, Wilson saw the influence “of those secularists and humanists, and others who [were] ideologically committed to bringing a secular society into being, as having been no more than at best marginal to the momentum of the process of secularization” (Wilson 1982, 149).

A similar theory was conceived by Peter L. Berger, who, together with Thomas Luckmann, suggested a market model for a modern sociology of religion in the 1960s. According to this model, church and religion competed with other “religious providers,” such as secular ideas and ideologies or science. According to Berger, secular ideas or worldviews could differ in content from religious worldviews but were similar in function and effect. Accordingly, churches were forced to modify their offerings according to the wishes of their “clients” and were at risk of becoming one boring, standardized product among many others (Berger 1988). Furthermore, Berger stressed that conflicts such as the rivalry between religion and science depended on the perception (or invention) of the participants: “However valid the actual conflict between theology and the physical sciences may or may not be, there is no doubt that such a conflict has been profoundly believed to exist” (Berger 1969, 45).

More recently, Friedrich Tenbruck (1972, 1989) has contributed to this debate, from a perspective similar to that of Weber. Tenbruck posited that the conflicts between science and religion had resulted either from the universal pretensions of religious agents contradicting the
modern natural sciences (concerning questions of biology, astronomy, or physics, for example), or from the attempts of scientific agents to claim a sort of religious authority and to assume responsibility for all aspects of modern society (not unlike the aforementioned Ernst Haeckel), which Tenbruck labeled the “will to mission.” Yet the decidedly anti-religious effect of the sciences did not arise from a cognitive superiority but from the increasing control and restraint of life and nature afforded by scientific knowledge and inventions. Tenbruck claimed that religion could not be reduced to a cognitive dimension and that any attempt to supersede religion with cognitive factors alone would fail.

The current sociological debate generally disregards the influence of science or scientific knowledge on the process of secularization. This can be interpreted as an attempt to avoid the teleological ideas of the 19th century. But dispensing with the theories of Comte and Marx, some questions still remain, and the work of scholars such as Berger, Tenbruck, and McLeod shows that the debate on the interrelation of the rise of science and the decline of religion has not yet come to a conclusion. I see two major problems stemming from this debate. First, the influence of science on the field of religion is often described only from a historical perspective. Conflicts between religion and science are analyzed as historically unique events that have led to a separation of these spheres; however, such conflicts are seldom researched in terms of principle. So it is difficult to analyze their relationship and mutual influence systematically. Furthermore, in my opinion, the influence of organized anti-religious groups is still underestimated. Strikingly, current research on religious vitality stresses the role of organized agents, while secularization theory deals mostly with abstract and anonymous forces such as urbanization or industrialization. This

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4 The religious economy approach assumes a market model as well, with a market, however, that only consists of religious actors. Churches or other religious groups then compete with each other for members, money and the legitimacy of their worldviews. By assuming a fundamental and anthropological need for religion and by confining the market model to the classic religious sphere, the religious economy model regressed to a position that does not take into account the insights of Peter L. Berger. The RE-concept clearly focuses on competition only within the traditional religious field, thereby neglecting the impact of secular agents or science.

5 See e.g. Jagodzinski and Dobbelaere (1993, 71). Casanova (1994, 23ff.) briefly mentions the rise of the sciences as one of four causes of societal differentiation during the early modern era. For more on conflicts between science and religion, see Tenbruck (1972, 1989).
view is in line with Hugh McLeod who posited that, rather than seeing secularization as an “impersonal ‘process’ […] it would be better to see it as a ‘contest’, in which adherents of rival worldviews battled it out” (McLeod 2000, 28).

Recently, Philip S. Gorski (2000, 2003) suggested a secularization theory combining both sociological and historical perspectives. His model refers to authors such as David Martin and Hugh McLeod and stresses the competition between secular and religious agents, with emphasis placed on “worldviews.” To explain religious decline or upswing from this perspective, it is necessary to research the relation between churches and the secular state. Gorski, furthermore, referred to Weber and Durkheim and their conceptions of social differentiation, especially the conflicts between different spheres of knowledge and values. Gorski’s model clearly seeks to address many problems of the debate on secularization and the relation between the secular and the religious spheres. He insists on an understanding of secularization as a historically influenced process that is mainly a conflict between different worldviews.

This model also enables us to integrate the conflicts between science and religion systematically. At a theoretical level, each sphere can be considered different from the other, following its own distinct logic. On the other hand, it is also possible to research observable conflicts at an empirical level. The causes of these conflicts have already been described by Weber. Our particular interest lies in cases in which science develops into an agent in terms of providing people with salvation and meaning, or, as Robert Montgomery (2004) puts it, science turns “imperialistic.” For this, I will use the term scientistic instead. I will refer to scientism (or being scientistic) as a particular interpretation of science. Scientism is a universal worldview that foresees science with three functions: science should help to explain the world (both natural and social); science should provide individuals and society with instructions on how to act and live; and that science should provide individual lives and society with meaning.

These functions are clearly different from today’s general understanding of science. But far from being an abstract construction, the definition does align with certain historic ideas and organizations. As I will show, the history of eastern Germany is especially rife with examples of organizations that believed in the power of science and hoped to analyze and solve social problems by scientific means. When science adopts this Weltanschauung and seeks to take over all the functions of
“traditional religion,” this new “scientific religion” begins to pose a serious threat to it (Tenbruck 1989).

A short history of secularism and the Urania Society

Scientism was not invented in the GDR. There had indeed been a long history of organizations that promoted science to fight religion. The earliest and most prominent example of this was the Secular Society, which was founded in London in 1851 and consisted of more than 100 branches by the 1880s (Budd 1977; Lübbe 1974, 1975). In the name of science, the lectures and papers of the Secular Society attacked the ‘immorality’ and ‘untruths’ of the Bible and the political influence of the church. One early and prominent example of such thinking was the work of Auguste Comte. French positivism, in Comte’s tradition, perceived the world as organized and ruled by universal laws. Positivism not only sought to decipher those laws but also tried to establish science as a religion scientifique universelle, which would guide the world into a better and rational future and ultimately replace Christianity.6

By the end of the 19th century, the scientistic movement became influential in Germany as well. The most prominent example was the German Monistenbund, founded in 1906. By moving beyond both politics and religion, it aimed at the establishment of “a reasonable, free, scientific, and consistent view of life and the world.”7 Thanks to Ernst Haeckel and his book “The Riddle of the Universe” (1899) the society quickly gained renown. Together with Haeckel the Monistenbund was led by another prominent scientist, the chemist and Nobel laureate Wilhelm Ostwald. Ostwald contributed to the perception of the society by giving lectures entitled “Monist Sunday Sermons.” Other associations founded at the time included the German Society for Ethical Culture and the Freethinkers (see Lübbe 1974; Groschopp 1994).

These organizations were not large in terms of membership numbers. They did, however, become fairly popular through the numerous books, papers, and magazines that they published. They also stayed in close contact with other societies engaged in the education of workers. It is therefore no coincidence that the anti-religious groups had a

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7 Cited in: Das Monistische Jahrhundert, Heft 22, 1912–13, 740.
particular influence in Thuringia, Saxony, and Berlin. These regions were strongholds of the labor movement at this time, a movement marked by a strong anti-clerical slant. The strength of the German anti-religious and scientific movement can be contrasted with the movement in England: While the scientific movement had emerged in Britain earlier, it never associated with the more liberal labor parties. Soon, German scientism exceeded English secular societies both in terms of members and influence. And in Germany, scientism did not remain an exclusively intellectual phenomenon but involved different social classes and groups as well (Budd 1977; Evans 1991).

The Urania Society was founded at about this time by German astronomers and industrialists in Berlin. The organization would soon build a public observatory and organize public scientific lectures. Max Planck and Albert Einstein, among others, presented the results of their research and explained the methods of modern science there. The Urania Society can thus be considered a product of bourgeois society, which at that time was highly engaged in the dissemination of education and knowledge. The Urania Society had, it must be said, no overt anti-religious agenda. It merely intended to provide scientific knowledge without establishing a connection to any particular worldview, despite Wilhelm Foerster, one of the founders, featuring prominently at the time in the discussions on secularism in Berlin. Crucially, however, the Urania did inspire a number of citizens in other cities to found similar institutions for popular science. Today, observatories or Urania associations exist in a number of European cities such as Budapest. During the Weimar Republic era, the Urania, however, collapsed due to massive financial problems that began to emerge after the First World War, which would eventually lead to its bankruptcy in 1926 (see Daum 2002; Ebel and Lührs 1988; Hess 1979).

A subsequent organization, the *Urania Freies Bildungsinstitut* (“Urania Free Learning Institute”) was founded in 1924 in Jena, Thuringia by Julius Schaxel, a biologist at the local university, and published a journal, also entitled *Urania*. Politically speaking, Schaxel was a Marxist. He had studied in Jena under Ernst Haeckel and still

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8 Urania was founded in 1888 as a joint stock company by Wilhelm Foerster, Max Wilhelm Meyer, and Werner von Siemens. The latter, a notable among the German bourgeoisie, provided the financial resources that were necessary for this. Meyer was a scientific journalist and had previously run a “theatre of science” in Vienna. Foerster worked as the head of the Royal Prussian observatory and initiated the foundation of Urania.
had connections to Haeckel and other members of the *Monistenbund*. This organization was a more obvious forerunner to the GDR's Urania and stressed an anti-religious interpretation of science. Jena’s Urania Society confined its work to Thuringia but was well-known and successful in neighboring Saxony as well. In 1933, however, the National Socialists would close down the Urania in Jena. Schassel escaped to Moscow, where he worked at the Academy of Sciences until he passed away in 1943.

After 1945, Urania societies were resurrected in both German states. The society based in West Berlin, founded in 1953 and still in existence today, confined its activities to the city-state of Berlin itself and was largely dedicated to the field of cultural education. One year later, on June 17, 1954, the Urania of the German Democratic Republic was founded in East Berlin. The organization, known as the *Gesellschaft zur Verbreitung wissenschaftlicher Kenntnisse* (“Society for the Dissemination of Scientific Knowledge”) until 1966, was financed mainly by the state. The society’s purpose was to educate and offer the “light of science” to all segments of the population.9 The Urania general secretary thus remarked in 1954: “While the enemies of progress use inhuman, non-scientific theories to confuse the masses and to be able to misuse them for war and destruction, we will present the true mechanisms underlying natural and social phenomena.”10 The organization wanted to give people the opportunity to obtain new knowledge easily. Workers could listen to lectures on biology or astronomy during their breaks or after work. Public talks indeed served as a mainstay of the society, which were offered in cooperation with the scientists and employees of various universities and research institutes. Starting in 1960, the Urania Society began to acquire its own venues in different towns. It also published journals with its own publishing house, and presented television programs and regular radio broadcasts. Of course, by offering its ‘truth,’ the organization also hoped to create citizens loyal to the state. The society was indeed an influential state organization with branches in nearly every town in East Germany, and one of the main institutional actors supporting the atheist politics of the state, although always in combination with the spread of science. The notion

of science as propagated by the Urania Society was clearly rooted in the scientific groups of the 19th century; it was not by chance that the name of the society’s highest award was the ‘Ernst-Haeckel-Medaille’.

Program and work of the Urania Society in the GDR

According to the founding documents of the Urania Society, the new organization was meant to propagate a wissenschaftliche Weltanschauung, or scientific worldview, a term that was also generally used to refer to Marxism-Leninism. The term stressed the scientific character of Marxism-Leninism in particular, a view of science as the only path to a glorious future. This materialistic and scientific worldview focused solely on empirical and provable phenomena, promising to guide individual lives and make sense of life and death, claiming in the process to supersede all forms of religion. The scientific worldview of the East German regime was indeed a new version of the same old scientific story about the superiority of science (among others Klohr 1958; Klaus et al. 1959; Klein and Redlow 1973).

The first years of the society’s existence saw frequent harsh and polemic attacks directed at religion, attacks launched in a euphoric mood that was fuelled by the opportunity to fight “at last” against “the old ways of thinking.” The Urania Society would go on to launch furious and aggressive attacks on “superstition and traditional thinking.” Its lecturers were instructed to underscore the “unworthiness and harmfulness of non-scientific knowledge and a non-scientific worldview, in whatever shape or form,” including superstition, mysticism, astrology, and idealism. The society’s goal was “to immunize the people against such phenomena.”

The Urania Society would begin to modify its activities toward the end of the 1950s, promoting a systematic atheism that was pitted against all kinds of superstition. The basis for this work was a scientific worldview and “dialectic materialism as a Weltanschauung,” adhering closely to scientific knowledge about nature and society. The popularization of this worldview, which all East Germans were expected to

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14 SAPMO-BArch, DY 11/ DY 30/IV 2/9.03 23, p. 3.
adopt, appeared to be the Urania’s main goal. Again, scientism was defined by contrasting it with religion: While the ignorance of natural processes was seen as a breeding ground “for superstition, mysticism, and fatalism,” when combined with religious ideologies this would be enough to hinder science and future discoveries. Given that scientific thinking and socialist behavior were intertwined, non-scientific ideologies were viewed as a real danger to the state. During the 1950s, the Urania published about 40 booklets of which 15 constituted propaganda in support of atheism.

In the 1960s, the Urania Society began to focus increasingly on politics, while the SED instructed the Society to step up its production of economic propaganda. The regime was indeed in the process of introducing its New Economic System (NES) to boost the economy. The NES offered factories more opportunities to plan and organize their work autonomously and promised to reward successful companies with better funding. During this period, somewhat less emphasis was placed on the propagation of a scientific worldview and the fight against religious worldviews, although these aims did continue to figure prominently.

Religion indeed continued to be seen as something to be defeated into the 1970s. At the beginning of the decade, the central office of the Urania Society continued to seek to “strengthen the atheistic character of our organization.” The society dealt with religion and churches in an increasingly implicit manner, in an approach that was in line with its efforts to raise the atheistic propaganda “to a new level.” In the society’s writings and booklets, terms such as ethics, morals, and humanism were common. Instead of linking “non-scientific and reactionary ideologies” to the activities of the churches, the society now avoided any open hostility towards religion. Authors used phrases such as “irrational ways of thinking and behavior,” but continued their attacks against a “belief in creation and idealistic interpretations of life.”

During the 1980s, the Urania Society intensified its ideological work and Weltanschauung propaganda, now referring to religion from an

historical perspective. The anniversaries of Martin Luther and Thomas Müntzer offered opportunities to honor particular streams within Christianity, while the organization’s first recorded lectures on Islam also appeared at this time. Largely, the Urania avoided open references to religion. It continued its atheistic work at this subtle “new level.” Instead of speaking of “irrational ways of thinking and acting,” it used its new catchphrase, “a variety of worldviews.”

After 1989 and the breakdown of the GDR, the society was resurrected again but at the local level. Today, small, generally independent Urania associations still exist in various towns and cities of eastern Germany, each with one or two employees. With lectures, language instruction, and excursions on offer, in what is purported to be a politically neutral program, the associations seem to have their strongest following among older people. Today’s Urania tends to look back more to its early roots during the German Kaiserreich than to its more recent GDR history.

All told, the Urania Society serves as an impressive example both for the tradition and the development of scientism in Germany. Confined to smaller groups and a particular social setting during both the Kaiserreich and the Weimar Republic (even with a wide range of publications), scientism experienced an impressive institutional take-off in the GDR. During this time, the propagation of scientism as a central societal leitmotiv was, however, by no means confined to Urania, with schools and universities, mass organizations and other institutions all making strong contributions toward this end. The particular importance of the Urania can, however, be illustrated in three points:

First, the Urania Society was able to attract a remarkably large audience. Only a few years after its post-war founding, the society was welcoming more than eight million guests each year to its lectures and exhibitions. By the 1980s, this number had increased to twelve million guests per year. A large part of the GDR population came in contact with Urania by attending lectures, purchasing Urania magazines and books, or watching its television broadcasts. Even if attendance at Urania events was sometimes part of an obligatory collective program (for instance at the factory), it does not make sense to speak of a mass obligation to participate in the society. The lack of alternatives or other

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means to obtain modern scientific knowledge made Urania all the more important and useful.

Secondly, the scientistic character of the Urania program was not stated in explicit or obvious terms, facilitating the reception of its specific worldview. Urania tried to combine popular scientific topics (e.g. astronomy, aerospace) with a particular interpretation based in the scientistic Weltanschauung. By connecting these two elements, the society translated and transformed the official ideology and made it more popular to people who were otherwise not at home in the socialist or academic milieus.

And thirdly, the society’s influence did not only occur through individual events. More broadly, Urania can be viewed as an institution that helped define the limits of “legitimate knowledge” within the GDR. Controlled and directed by the central party and state institutions, and following the same lines as other educational agents in the GDR, the Urania Society played a role in forming a common cultural sphere. This sphere, however, also extended to religion, a field not mentioned (in positive terms) in the Urania program, which in turn contributed to the exclusion of religious topics from the common “stock of knowledge” (Schütz). This exclusion was especially evident during times when only implicit mention was made of religion.

**Reception of the scientific worldview in East Germany**

Recent surveys have shown that the reception of scientism in the GDR, in comparison with West Germany, has resulted in a much more positive attitude towards science and technology and, in broader terms, a general orientation towards that which can be grasped only by reason. Above all, religion and modernity are widely considered to be conflicting entities rather than independent spheres of knowledge (Jaufmann 1992; Wohlrab-Sahr and Benthaus-Apel 2006). These findings do not, however, corroborate the thesis that East Germans adopted the scientistic worldview completely (see Meulemann 1996). The scientistic belief in the transcendent truth of science is not very widespread. The surveys instead revealed that while many East Germans accepted the anti-religious dimension of the scientistic worldview, they shared in the worldview only in that they regarded science as superior to religion, but without perceiving science as the solution to all societal and individual problems.
The surveys, however, clearly leave room for many further questions. To explore the reception of the scientific worldview on an individual, more detailed basis, I conducted 16 biographical interviews of Urania functionaries. Of course, the results of these biographical interviews cannot be interpreted as being representative of East Germany as a whole. They do, however, demonstrate how the promotion of scientism contributed to individual processes of secularization and, furthermore, how they can be seen to contribute to a theory regarding the relationship between science and religion.

The interviews were conducted between 2003 and 2004. All interviewees were functionaries or members of the Urania Society, working in different positions, from the central office in Berlin to small Urania branches in rural areas. The interviewees were asked to talk about their life stories and especially their work at Urania. In addition to their biographical narratives, I was interested in their perception of science and religion.

Based on my interpretation of the interviews, I constructed three ideal types presenting a different perspective on the relation between religion and science: (pessimistic) ‘scientism,’ ‘materialistic secularism,’ and ‘functional differentiation.’ While these types reveal a remarkable variety with regard to the perception of the scientific worldview and the relation between science and religion, they also demonstrate – especially the first two types – the particular success of the SED’s politics, and the specific lack of religiosity that can be found in East Germany today. In the following, I will briefly outline the main structure of each of these types, especially with regard to the relation between religion and science.

Type I: (Pessimistic) Scientism

The first type can be referred to as ‘scientistic,’ but in a rather pessimistic form. From this viewpoint, science is the deciding driving force behind societal development and individual perfection. This position thus mainly follows the official ideology of the scientific worldview. The following sequence from an interview with a former functionary illustrates this position:

Um, I would see the natural sciences as the basis of all – as the basis for life. So to speak, the natural sciences are … are the ones that have brought humanity forward. Whether it be the control of fire or, um, or chemistry or cast metal, or mineral extraction, concerning all physical aspects… it's
actually the basis, say, for human development in general, not only for technical improvements.

For such a person, the natural sciences are clearly the one solution to societal problems and the basis for social development. They are of basic importance to all spheres of society, and are indeed “the basis for life.” He explains this central position by describing the functions nature serves for mankind, with society and individual human beings inferior to nature. Both of them depend on natural resources and laws, and without any knowledge of these phenomena, a society is doomed to perish. There are, moreover, no mystic, hidden, or unknowable things in nature, which can instead be perceived through human awareness and cognition. The natural sciences, and all sciences that investigate the natural basis of life, are therefore of fundamental significance in themselves. Viewed as important for “human development in general,” the natural sciences are thus viewed as the most prominent sciences and the method of solving social problems and promoting development, par excellence. Science is thus seen not only as a way of viewing the natural world, but also as a universal means of interpreting the entire social and individual spheres. Science can then be described as a type of universal system of meaning, superior to any other form of worldview.

From this perspective, science is not only considered to be an alternative view of the world to religion, but indeed the only reasonable view. Because science is seen as a universal means of explaining the world and all spheres of life, religion and science must not only be seen to compete, but also to be in direct conflict with one another. In sociological terms, society is not differentiated by functional systems, but dedifferentiated, with science being the major system that replaces other spheres (see Karstein et al. 2006; Wohlrab-Sahr et al. 2008).

I mean, science is just researching the, the world as it is [laughing] while, and while religion is a belief in, in … um… what is it? I am just thinking, what shall I say? It is something completely different, isn’t it? One thing can’t just replace the other, but it is necessary to replace it. If I am educated in a scientific way, it is much more likely to be not religious, you know, than, you know, than in case that I believe in anything….

This sequence from another interview indicates a central argument of the (pessimistic) scientific position: science is the sole worldview oriented towards “objective reality,” and which therefore increases human knowledge and leads to insights and conclusions. In contrast, religion
is perceived as something “completely different” that does not observe the world “as it is.” This position can be interpreted in two different ways. Either religion is blind to the world and addresses only transcendent extramundane spheres, or religion sees the world but fails to grasp its actual “objective” condition. Religion is thus seen to perceive the world in a false way and is only interested in how the world should be. In both cases, religion fails to contribute to “objective” societal knowledge, and is confined to a cognitive dimension and naïve explanations of nature (creation theory) that have turned out to be false. This reduction enables religion to be placed in direct competition with science, the result of which is that science outclasses and supersedes religion as “false knowledge.”

What makes this type of scientism ‘pessimistic’ is its lack of belief in the victory of science. One of the core elements of the ideology supported by organizations such as the Monistenbund and the SED was the assumption that, in the long run, scientific knowledge would supersede all other forms of thinking and interpretations of the world. In contrast, the interviewees of this type have lost this conviction. The main reason for this change was not a limited belief in the truth and power of science but rather the belief that the enlightening power of science and scientific propaganda has failed. To put it bluntly, they are pessimistic because they believe the rest of the population to be too stupid to realize scientific truth. For them, people are too selfish or too poorly educated to discover the power of science and in the end the project of scientism cannot succeed. The collapse of the GDR and the rest of Soviet Bloc can of course help us to understand this position. Their particular experience, the failure of their own life projects, has led directly to a pessimistic evaluation of the future chances of scientism. While preserving the truth of scientism, their positions create a sort of enlightened scientific elite in contrast with the ignorant (religious) majority.

Type 2: Materialistic secularism

I refer to the second type as materialistic secularism. In contrast with the first type, it does not follow an ideological interpretation of science. According to this position, science does not have the capacity to solve all social and individual problems or to guide politics and society in general. This type of secularist materialism is, however, also characterized by a strict orientation towards materialistic explanations of the
world. Reality can be grasped only through empirical and direct experience, and can be proven only through objective findings. Finally, and most interestingly, the interviewees of this type harshly reject religion, a rejection that goes far beyond mere indifference. What sometimes appears, on the surface, to be indifference turns out to be a secularist interpretation of religion. Analogous to the state's attempts to confine religion to the cultic and exclusively private sphere, the interviewees of this type do not accept any public or political activity on the part of the churches. While politics and science—from this perspective—are legitimate societal spheres, the social function and place of religion are neglected.

My father, uhm, was someone… he didn't feel very attached to the… as I said, he soon told me about everything. He said “You have to differentiate between Christianity and the church. The church agreed with the war.” He wasn't satisfied at all about that, but this is the point where we are again today. Why is it possible to say “Helmets off for prayer” at the Bundeswehr? Again, this isn't the church's business, or the business of Christianity, is it? They shall… their values point to an absolutely different direction, don't they?

In this sequence the interviewee characterizes his own father as being dissociated from the church because of its political engagement. From this perspective, he distinguishes between church and religion so that he can reject the church, without stating anything about religion in general. The phrase “soon told me” underlines the truth of his father's words and his damnation of the alliance between church and state. From his point of view, this alliance and the illegitimate position of the church and religion within the army today reveal the double-minded character of the church. Another interviewee argues similarly:

I have to say that I cancelled my membership after the breakdown of the wall. It's funny, isn't it? It was not about the church taxes, I simply recognized that many are preaching water whilst drinking wine. Therefore I said ‘No, I don't have to stand for that.' As I said, I really would like to give some money for the local basilica when they need help. But, I don't have to donate anything to anybody there, just so that something can happen there.

In this sequence, the church is depicted as an opaque, anonymous, bureaucratic organization, the activities of which remain nebulous. The value of the church lies in its historical edifice, while the church as an organization can be left behind. There again appears to be no legitimate public or societal place for religion from this perspective. Religion
is acceptable only as a private pleasure, without any social, political, or public consequences. Within this private sphere, religion may be of importance in fostering ethical values, for example, or as a means for helping “weak people,” which is meant in a pejorative way. Not surprisingly, people of this type are proud of their individual secularization, considering it reasonable and a form of liberation and enlightenment.

**Type 3: Functional differentiation**

The third and last type perceives religion and science as equal social spheres, each with the same rights. Both spheres are focused on specific social and ideal problems, and the interviewees do not distinguish them in terms of their value or societal importance. Even those who are not members of a church may support such a distinction without value judgements. And even when these people consider science to be the only appropriate means to interpret and explain nature and the empirical world, religion is not restricted to the private sphere. From this viewpoint, science and religion have different functions and qualities, and are, in a way, not comparable. Religion can thus be accepted as a public actor, for example in debates on genetic research or similar topics.

**Conclusion**

The relation between the religious and the secular in the GDR is not an easy matter for sociological analysis. While conflicts clearly raged among science, politics, and religion between 1945 and 1989, it is hard to describe these conflicts in a theoretically and analytically adequate manner. Theories that exclude certain phenomena for theoretical or normative reasons, such as numerous conceptions on the relationship between religion and science (Comte, Frazer, etc.) are bound to fail (see Schmidt-Lux 2008).

My thesis differs from theses based on the dichotomy of classical science and religion insofar as it does not refer to science and religion in a normative or ontological manner. I am instead concerned with the aims and self-conception of religious and scientistic agents as well as the reception of religious and scientistic ideologies. The acceptance or

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20 For the position of functional differentiation on a societal level see Luhmann 2000.
rejection of propagated ideas and programs, whether traditionally religious or scientistic, is the crucial point for the success of any ideology. It is thus fruitless to pinpoint the outcome or end of the secularization process; secularization should instead be conceptualized as a principally open process. The temporary degree of secularization can be observed by the institutional arrangement of a society, by the cultural position of religion and by the individual acceptance of religious ideas and practices (Berger 1988). While the prospects of religious or secular agents depend on their resources and their legal positions, the core of the conflict lies in a conflict of rival worldviews.

This can in fact be seen in the example of the GDR, even if distinctions between the secular and the religious were blurred during East Germany’s socialist era, as the secular sciences took up religious ambitions and transcendent functions to compete with traditional religious agents and ideas. The scientific worldview played a central role in this development, and was touted as more than a means of responding to a limited set of questions about the world. The term Weltanschauung particularly hints at the all-encompassing notion of this worldview.

In order to observe and to conceptualize these phenomena, a theory of secularization that particularly focuses on conflicts is needed, one which encompasses not only political conflicts and anti-religious state repression, but especially conflicts between different worldviews. Such a perspective could be inspired by the work of Weber, Berger, and Tenbruck. In contrast with theories that claim to establish clear-cut results of rivalries between secular and religious agents, this perspective should stress the ongoing and permanent character of conflicts between worldviews. But above all, this theory of secularization should take into consideration the interpretations and constructions of the involved actors themselves. From this point of view, the described scientistic hope for a victory of ‘scientific reason’ over religion does not appear to be an irreversible natural law. It can instead be understood as a particular interpretation of the relationship between science and religion, one that is indeed ruled by many preconditions.

It would now appear obvious that the socialist project and its teleological mission in the GDR have failed. Yet, it would be naïve and sociologically limiting to assume that this period of time did not in fact leave its mark. On the contrary, many surveys and research projects have revealed that the aftereffects of the anti-religious propaganda and the promotion of an all-embracing notion of science are especially remarkable with regard to religion. As historians have established,
eastern Germany has been a unique region of the world in terms of religion and its absence since the early 20th century (Hölscher 2001). This uniqueness is not only the consequence of the political repression of the churches and church members in the GDR, but also the result of the long-term propagation of scientistic ideas, which would emerge as a factor in the secularization process in East Germany. Additional research in the field of scientism and religion will tell us more about the secularization process in the region and will contribute to any comparative research involving other eastern European societies.

References


Wohlrab-Sahr, Monika. 2007. Religion and Science or Religion versus Science? About the social construction of science-religion-antagonism in the German Democratic
Like the other East European countries under Soviet domination after 1945, East Germany also witnessed the establishment of a series of practices for the symbolical legitimation of the new ideological order. Soon after the delineation of the Soviet zone within German territories, the new authorities sought to introduce ritual forms to educate and mobilize the people to comply with the new regime – many of them transferred directly from the Soviet Union, bearing emphasized secular content, and targeting the establishment of new political and public identities along ideological and atheistic lines. The variety of such public occasions was enormous – including monument building and commemorative meetings dedicated to the memory of individuals particularly linked with the ideology, political rituals aimed at the reshaping the public calendar, and educational activities geared toward creating citizens of a new socialist society. Despite their diversity in terms of particular purpose and context of performance, the public ritual activities introduced in East Germany during the first post-war decade shared many common features, including strong politicized overtones (ranging from an anti-militarist spirit in the late 1940s to enhanced warlike overtones in defence of communist ideology in the 1950s), the combination of elements such as those related to propaganda, social change, and educational instruction, and shared ritualistic content (involving political speeches, bowing in memory of fallen comrades, solemn oaths, etc.). It is particularly remarkable that two parallel and systematically pursued tendencies marked the different occasions of public rituals from the late 1940s – one of ensuring commemorative attention to the memory of individuals particularly linked with the ideology, and the other of purging the ritual acts from religious references and of carrying out ritual activities in emphasized secular overtones. The present article will reflect upon the relationship
between these two tracks and will interpret them as being interdependent in the general context of the post-war developments in East Germany.

The goal of the text is to trace the main aspects of this secularization process, as carried out in the public rituals and political commemoration in the first post-war decade in East Germany. It is not the intention of the article to explore in depth the orchestration and setting of different commemorative occasions – as, despite their occurrence in East German setting, they did not differ substantially from the practices and commemoration policies of the other countries under Soviet rule at the time. Its intention is instead to provide an overview of the context in which these forms of ideological activity evolved after 1945, and to explore their relevance to the particular configuration of religion and the secular in post-war East Germany. The major foci of attention in the text will thus be: the political and social circumstances in the first decade after 1945 and the role of commemorations in establishing ideological legitimacy; the changes in the system of education and the use of public rituals as tools to indoctrinate the youth; the anti-religious and atheist propaganda and the ideological policies for introducing secular rituals in the public and private spheres; and, lastly, the relationship of commemorative activities to major points in the post-war interpretations of history. Aside from their impact on memory processes after 1945, all these will be brought forth to highlight how political rituals were a key tool in the secularization processes of the time, and how the gradual consolidation of the public activities around the communist doctrine laid the grounds for a secular ‘religiosity’ that the communist regime pursued in the decades to follow.

**East Germany in the first postwar decade: contextualizing remarks**

The exploration of such issues in the context of East Germany is particularly shaped by the unique course that the country followed in post-war political developments, and it is namely this aspect, and not the character of commemorative activities per se, that is worth emphasizing from the start. The case of Germany as a defeated nation, as a divided state, and an object of ‘normalization’ on the part of the Allies led to this unique course in its post-war developments that had few parallels elsewhere. Undoubtedly, the inclusion of East Germany into
the Soviet orbit followed routes comparable to those of the other countries of Eastern Europe at the time, but it was also guided by a series of issues that were strongly specific to the German context and which were quite peculiar to the East German experience. The shadow of the Nazi past and the compulsive stance of overcoming this immediate legacy; the pressing issue of denazification and of purging the public sphere from the traces of the Nazi period; the responsibility for war crimes and destruction all across Europe, and for the Holocaust as the most terrible event in twentieth century European history – were realms that were especially painstaking to come to terms with in the post-war reconstruction. Although the issues of compliance and collaboration with Nazi rule resonated in all the countries of Europe at the time, and although these issues were met in a similar manner in all the countries to the east of the Iron Curtain, it was in East Germany that their sharpness demanded radical transformations, supplemented with even more radical legitimation narratives. This, in turn, was legitimated by the division of the defeated state, and with the compelling need to justify the separate presence of East Germany to its ideologically distinct, but equally German, neighbor. In addition to posing additional challenges with regard to the political and ideological legitimation of the new state, it guided the attempts to sustain a separate ‘national’ identity over the following decades, in which the purported decisive and complete break with the Nazi past served as an important identifier.

The establishment of new secular rituals and commemorative acts after 1945 was conditioned by these particular aspects of the post-war context and by the special status of East Germany as a zone (and since 1949, a state) in which the antifascist-democratic liberation struggle reached its “culmination,” opening a “new epoch in the history of the German people” (Ross 2002, 7). One should not fail to note here the special role of East Germany in Soviet policy and the subsequent zig-zag and reluctance toward attempting to implement certain elements of socialism – which, taken together, outline both the perspectives and the drama of the destiny of falling within the Soviet grip. The enormous economic, political, and social difficulties of the first post-war years had to be solved in the midst of a thorough social and political transformation along the lines of the model imported from the Soviet Union. The overcoming of starvation and epidemics during the first weeks of occupation, the clearing of the rubble, and the gradual normalization of life conditions was paralleled by the systematic Sovietization of the eastern occupation zone and its development into...
a Stalinist satellite. Following the communist understanding of fascism as the “dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinist and most imperialist elements of finance capital” (Ross 2002, 7), the transformation of the Soviet Zone of occupation and the founding of the GDR in 1949 included a range of measures to combat the fascist past in economic and political terms. As in other East European states that fell within Stalin’s grip, the first years after 1945 were marked by the nationalization of many large-scale industrial enterprises, the expropriation of large landowners, and first steps toward mass collectivization. The establishment of the GDR in October 1949 under the control of the SED (the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, formed when the German Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party were forcibly merged in 1946) concluded “the first stage of the people’s democratic revolution” and opened the horizon for creating “the basis of socialism” (Ross 2002, 7). In turn, it continued with a program of rapid social change and short-term economic growth. By late 1952, the devastating effects of these policies had gradually become evident – both in human and economic terms (see Osterman 2001).

The forced socialization of industry and agriculture in late 1940s and early 1950s contributed to the deepening of the socio-economic crisis after the war and to growing disillusionment concerning the propagated Soviet reconstruction of East Germany. Whereas the enhanced policy towards developing heavy industry led to a shortage of consumer goods production and hence a lagging living standard, the drive for collectivization in agriculture led to the overturn of traditional agricultural organizations, the introduction of state-enforced delivery quotas, and widespread food shortages throughout the country. The pressure was even greater at the political and social levels, where the maintenance of established Soviet control was carried out through the expansion of the security apparatus, mass terror, purges, and show trials. The policies of purging the society and its institutions from figures who had sympathized with the Nazi state and the persecutions against those who have had been directly involved in Nazi crimes were soon overridden by a system of new punitive measures propelled by the communist authorities. A law for the protection of people’s property and the massive number of arrests and trials that it brought about; a direct assault on potential sources of opposition (political parties, churches, prominent intellectuals, etc.); purges and trials against political rivals, who were considered to be enemies and spies, were among the numerous expressions of the party’s tightening pressure on the population. The overt assaults on the churches, and
especially on the dominant Protestant Church and its active youth organizations or Junte Gemeinde; large scale educational reforms and the establishment of Free German Youth organization as a means of creating ‘true socialist citizens,’ the build-up of separate East German armed forces and the introduction of compulsory military service were among the wide-scale institutional measures of communist control and repression. In addition, the strict lines of industrial work, the harsh party discipline across various sectors of society, the witch hunts of enemies and spies further enhanced the atmosphere of suppression, which led many East Germans flee in mass numbers to West Germany. Despite the visible signs of dissatisfaction and opposition among the population, the SED persisted fervently in the application of Stalinist policies well until early 1953, when following Stalin’s death, Moscow recommended a softening of the policies implemented for the accelerated construction of socialism. Oriented mainly toward the modification of economic policies and toward waiving repressions against wide circles of the population, the criticisms of the East German government did not include the full transformation of the system of control, as was visible both in the suppression of the popular uprising of 17 June 1953, and in the continuing measures of limited freedom in the years to follow.

Monument building, public rituals, and memory consolidation

It is in this context of slogan-stated reforms and harsh realities that the role of public rituals and commemorations takes on particularly startling contours. As in the other East European states of the communist bloc, the enhanced system of ideological rituals and public ceremonies also functioned as a means of redirecting public attention to the atmosphere of chaos and disruption that surrounded the economic and social measures of the communist regime. They were an inherent part of the system of transforming the society to comply with Marxist-Leninist theory and of transforming people themselves, of gradually remodeling their attitudes and values to coincide with those of the party and its Soviet counterpart. Aside from their function as

1 According to statistics, around 166,000 people fled to West Germany in 1951; 182,000 in 1952, and 122,000 in the first four months of 1953. In 1953, the SED proposed to shut the border between the Eastern and Western sectors, thus foreshadowing the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 (see Osterman 2001).
propaganda and as a means of reasserting the validity of the path to the establishment of communism, they lay the ground of what Fulbrook terms as the “founding myth of the GDR” – the myth of the antifascist liberation of innocent German workers and peasants (Fulbrook 1997, 28). Manifested by a surge of monuments, slogans, and other visual representations, they outlined the contours of the heroic struggle and sacrifice that would, in mythic dimensions, legitimate the victorious establishment of the new rule. The main coordinates of this new narrative was positioned along the axes of heroes and enemies, sharply dividing the respective profiles of the warring powers before 1945, and sending a clear message concerning the choice of affiliation that every ordinary German was supposed to embrace.

Among the public rituals in the first post-war decade, primary importance was placed on the commemorations of ideologically heroes, including relevant public activities. Supported by a range of propaganda tools, this system involved a series of ritual occasions, including the construction of monuments to the Soviet army and the heroes of the communist movement; the identification of certain days as days of remembering communist resistance and exploits; the organization of mourning meetings and ceremonies in memory of fallen comrades, etc. Beyond the diversity of their manifestations, the focus of these commemorative activities involved a narrow group with a strictly outlined profile – the soldiers of the Soviet army, the emblematic figures of the communist ideology (most prominently Marx, Engels, and Stalin), and important figures of the German and international communist movement. Although (unlike other East European countries) huge monuments to Stalin were not built in East Germany, many streets, boulevards, and institutions were in fact named after the Soviet leader in towns large and small (Bützow, Hermsdorf, Jena, Schwerin, Wurzen, Dessau, etc.) By the beginning of destalinization period of the early 1960s, most of these places had their names changed again. The most prominent example of such naming and renaming was the famous Stalinallee boulevard in Berlin, named as a gift to mark the leader’s 70th birthday and named after him until the early 1960s. Highlighting East Germany’s reconstruction program after World War II, the monumental socialist boulevard was renamed for Karl Marx in 1961 and bore his name for the decades to follow.\footnote{About the analysis of this project and its architectural and ideological importance see Åman 1992.} Whereas
Lenin was the one Soviet figure for whom most monuments were built from the 1960s onward, the founders of the socialist ideology, Marx and Engels, were the focus of monumental propaganda from the 1950s. In May 1953, Chemnitz was renamed Karl-Marx-Stadt, and several large monuments to the founder of the socialist ideology were created there, among which the imposing Karl Marx memorial created by Lew Kerbel (in 1971). Many other busts and statues of Karl Marx also began to appear in the first postwar decade in places such as Berlin and Dresden, as well as monuments of Marx and Engels together in Berlin and Chemnitz. Signifying the visual policies of the new communist state, these were sites where the primary political ceremonies meant to affirm the new ideology took place and where the establishment of secular political loci for public activity evolved.

Albeit touching upon an entire list of towns and villages in East Germany, Berlin, the capital, remained the center of attention for monument-building events, which saw the erecting of two major monuments dedicated to the Soviet army in the late 1940s and early 1950s (one in Treptower Park and another near the Reichstag), and tens of monuments and memorial signs for leaders and communist party activists. The Soviet War Memorial in Treptower Park was particularly notable for its size, its symbols of victory over Nazism (grieving mother, kneeling soldiers, etc.), and mortuary symbolism (sarcophagi with the remains of Soviet soldiers, crypt, weeping willows, etc.) Built at the site where a workers strike was held in 1919, led by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, the memorial area turned into a central focus of rituals to commemorate the war dead and to support the memory politics of East Germany. Aside from the memorial sites and monuments in Buchenwald, Weimar, and other towns of East Germany, Berlin was home to a huge memorial to Ernst Thälmann, the prominent leader of the German Communist Party, portrayed with a raised fist. The monument and the large square around it became a central point for political activities and rituals of dedication to the Party – later competed by a Lenin monument in the 1970s.

Memorial signs and commemorations to the founders and leaders of the German Communist Party (KPD) Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht formed an important focus of the East German memory politics during the first postwar decade, as expressed by the monuments. While the monument to Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (created in 1926 and destroyed during the Nazi period) was restored, many smaller new busts and slabs in
their honor appeared around the city. An indicative example of the sacralization of sites related to figures of the communist movement was the former Royal Palace, which was demolished in 1950, the only part that remained of it being the gateway where Liebknecht proclaimed the socialist Republic in 1918 – to be turned later into the seat of the GDR’s Council of State. The dedication of monuments and memorial sites to Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht (especially the one with their mortal remains) revived a practice dating back to the 1920s and developed as a powerful tradition in the post-war decades. Although the commemoration of these figures bore, from the very beginning, the significance of commemorating a full range of socialist and communist activists (social democrats, fighters in the Spanish Civil War, political prisoners during the war, etc.), the special focus in the 1950s was on the legitimizing power that Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht conferred to the newly established German state. Nurtured by the ideological narrative of the eternal remembrance of heroes, these memorial signs were revived both on special days such as state holidays, and the heroes’ birthdays and the anniversaries of their deaths. On an everyday basis, this involved the visits of students and workers accompanied by songs, the sober deposition of flowers, and minutes of silence.

Although until the late 1940s, these acts were performed mostly by socialist and anti-fascist organizations, by the early 1950s the role of the state in propagating, managing, and maintaining these commemorations took on considerable proportions. In the period following the defeat of Nazi Germany, carrying out these commemorative activities was especially notable with the opposition as it spoke to the immediate experience of the war years. With similarities to be seen among all the countries of Eastern Europe after the war, monument building and related commemorative activities signified important transformations in the preservation of public memory after the establishment of the Soviet rule in East Germany. Firstly, they marked a change in the institutions primarily responsible for sustaining collective remembrance. The sanctions imposed on the Protestant Church and other religious organizations; the transformation of the educational and military systems; the control of the public media, propaganda, and cultural

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3 On commemorations of socialist figures in Eastern Europe, see Fowkes 2002; Fowkes 2004; Maier 1996; Vukov 2007. On commemorations in East Germany, see especially Fulbrook 1999; Ross 2000; Van Vree 2003.
activities, etc.\textsuperscript{4} all exercised a direct impact on the institutional framework of the new commemorative initiatives and shifted their occurrence to an ideological realm dependent on the state. Secondly, they marked a break with previous forms of commemoration, be they the public rituals of the Nazi period, commemorations of events of national importance, or memorial activities informed by religion. Vividly expressed in the substitution of previous special days in public calendars by ones dedicated to communist figures, they found a variety of other spatial, visual, and symbolic manifestations – all of which had their role in the coining of new symbolic practices. Yet, thirdly, at the level of content, the new commemorative activities marked the establishment of exclusively secular means of representing death and a transition to predominantly secularized forms of public expression. The marginalization of religious elements in commemorating important public figures, their displacement by ideological ones in commemorative ceremonies, and the ideological optimism with regard to the ‘immortality’ of heroes were all elements in a steady shift toward secularization, one in which East Germany indeed constitutes an emblematic case.

It is important to emphasize that the politically staged rituals and celebrations took place in an environment of enormous complexity both in terms of the general political arena, and the public sphere, where the terrible memories of the war period coexisted with the immediate presence of persisting traces of the Nazi regime. Numerous memory realms did not find overt public expression such as the individual and family memories of the fallen at the front, the complicated memories of men who had fought for the Nazi cause, the silence with regard to the repatriation and burial of their remains, and the suppressed discussion about relatives who were captives, were interned in Soviet concentration camps, or who were lost in the whirlpool of war events. Whereas the burial and interment places of those who had not fought ‘on the right side’ were left without memorial signs, were unmarked and unattended, or were left to the use of church areas with all the complicated issues of grave care (see Lüdtke 1997), the memories of these people were either met with a symptomatic avoidance, or with remembrance exclusively in the family and personal spheres.

\textsuperscript{4} On the transformation of East Germany after 1945, and on the role of the Protestant Church in these processes, see esp. De Silva 2000; Naimark 1995; Sanford 1983.
The silence did not only involve the war participation of family members, however. One’s own involvement in the war-time events was also either submerged in concealment, or was viewed along the lines of collaboration with and support of the communist resistance. Traumatic events, such as experience in Soviet camps for war captives, or murder, torture, and sexual abuse at the hands of Soviet soldiers in the months following Germany’s capitulation, also did not move beyond the lines of individual and private reminiscence. Blurred by the contradiction of what had to be remembered and how it was to be accommodated with the policies of the present, all these divergent realms of memory were destined to be overcome by the heroic narratives of resistance and victory that were embraced in post-war East Germany. From such a perspective, the function of political commemorations – as introduced and sustained at the time, was considerable in channeling polyvalent individual and collective memories and in establishing a framework of simple and convenient reference.

**Education, youth, and the implanting of commemorative patterns**

While they had their general approach preordained as a direct Soviet import, the function of the political commemorations varied during the first post-war decade and in those that followed. Whereas in the period before the establishment of the GDR, they were significant as a primary encounter with a new ideological experience after years of Nazi indoctrination, in the late 1940s, they were increasingly perceived as the motors and pillars of a regime that came to replace Nazi rule and that was set to persist. From the perspective of their main initiators and promoters, the various forms of mass activities in support of communist rule were means of manifesting the new identity of the population and the transformative power of communist ideas, with a view to the remaining parts of German territory. With the creation of the GDR, their implementation functioned also as a means of demarcating the line between East and West Germany and of highlighting the opposition between the two ideological worlds. And yet, the first years of ideological indoctrination by the Soviet regime were followed by a boost in the militarist overtone of political commemorations. The ‘pacifist’ spirit that could be witnessed (at least at the general level) in the public rituals of the 1940s was sharply disrupted by an unconcealed
animosity towards the capitalist camp in the 1950s and to any potential
traitors within the socialist camp as well. The creation of an East
German army and the incorporation of political rituals and commem-
oration into the system of military education and training also sig-
naled an enhanced fighting spirit that encompassed most public rituals
for the decades to come.

A major issue in the carrying out of the commemorative activities
was the participation of young generation, which was a primary
addressee of ideological indoctrination and political pedagogy after
1945. Considered to be “relatively untainted by the evils of Nazi social-
ization, and thus especially capable of becoming socialized in the val-
ues and goals of socialism” (Ross 2000, 71), the younger generation
turned into a major focus of attempts to transform East German soci-
ety along communist lines. The initial steps in this direction were
already visible in the first years after 1945, with the purging of school
and university teachers, who were substituted by communist-minded
professors, with the introduction of subjects directly linked to the ide-
ological agenda and a reorientation of the entire educational curricu-
lum toward a basis in Marxism-Leninism. The main impetus was,
logically, to root out the elements of Nazi indoctrination from the edu-
cational system, but this was carried out with the ensuing indoctrina-
tion along Soviet lines and often testified to a direct substitution of one
master narrative with the other. While somewhat unsystematic in the
beginning, by the end of the 1940s, the reform of the education system
with the aim of cultivating the spirit of socialist patriotism and prole-
tariat internationalism was implemented. The induction of the young
people to the ideas of the new order was carried out on various levels –
talks, lectures, speeches, and not least with direct participation in dem-
onstrations, parades, and public meetings. These all overtly emphasized
and celebrated as “sacred” the self-sacrifice of the communist party
members for the Nazi defeat, the end of the war, and the establishment
of the communist order. The renaming of educational institutions after
the founding figures of the communist ideology and major figures of
the communist resistance was customarily accompanied with visual
representations dedicated to these figures (see Vukov 2007, 17). In
what will later become a pattern, as early as the late 1940s, the central
rituals of the school and university year (opening and graduation cer-
emonies, anniversary celebrations, etc.), involved abundant reminders
of the heroes, and ceremonial minutes of silence in their honor. The
reiteration of their sacrifice was turned into a ritual and civic duty, and
a sign of allegiance to the ideas propagated by the SED and its Soviet mentors. Through an emphasis on the communist self-sacrifice, students were reassured of the Party’s key role in the defeat of fascism and were instructed that exploits in the name of communist ideals was something to which every citizen of East Germany was to aspire (Vukov 2007). Thus, aside from integrating the youth into the new social and political system, these rituals consolidated a sense of veneration around the sanctified image of the Party and nurtured loyalty to its policies.

The role of commemorative forms in conveying the new ideological doctrine was furthermore enhanced with the SED gaining control over the organization of Free German Youth (Freie Deutsche Jugend, or FDJ), which – in the words of Walter Ulbricht, was to unite “all freedom-loving and democratically-minded German youth” (Brand 1975, 259). With the unconcealed political function to serve as an instrument of the SED in the socialization of society, Free German Youth played an important role in the Party’s project of cultivating young “socialist citizens” – in both a militaristic spirit and in due support of the Party policy against “religion and reaction.” The major preconditions for young East Germans to enter the Free German Youth were the cancellation of their ties with the churches, a dedication of their free time exclusively to the work of the organization, and the performance of their “patriotic duty” of protecting the GDR and its “socialist accomplishments” from the perceived military threat of the West (Ross 2000, 4). Departing from the impetus to root out the influence of religion and the Protestant church on the German population in the late 1940s, the FDJ soon evolved into an organization of military education and a system of mobilization and recruitment of young people for the police and the army. During the first years after 1945 the function of the FDJ was to override the secular pacifism that was widespread in post-war Germany, and the FDJ was soon directly tied into the build-up of the armed forces and the remilitarization in East Germany beginning in 1952.

All this left a particular imprint on the orchestration of the rituals for the acceptance and celebrations in the FDJ, which increasingly followed a militaristic model, with special attention placed on oaths, parades, marches with martial music, and an army-informed decor. The uniform clothing that was introduced for the members of FDJ, the flag drills, which were a customary element of all ceremonial occasions, and the firm discipline that surrounded the organization’s assemblies added much to the overall shaping of the youth ritual occasions in
a military and quasi-military fashion. In an atmosphere of still resonating memories of the wartime experience and of the supposed reservation among both the Allies and the ordinary population towards the reestablishment of German military force, the orchestrated rituals of FDJ introduced a ritualistically staged war spirit, leaving a firm mark on the evolving Cold War rhetoric. From such a perspective, the memory of communist and ideological heroes had a significance as a resource for mobilization directed both against wartime enemies and post-war ideological opponents. It was especially curious that the proclamation of the continuation of the struggle, as manifested by the diverse rituals dedicated to fallen communist resistance fighters, took place among children, youths and adolescents in a manner comparable (or even stronger) to the one among the adults.

ANTI-RELIGIOUS PROPAGANDA, INITIATION GEREMONIES, AND SECULAR RELIGIOUS SUBSTITUTES

Another especially important point is that the practice of creating commemorative traditions for communist heroes among younger generations was a direct reflection of the regime's anti-religious propaganda and introduction of new forms of secular religiosity dedicated to the Party and its emblematic figures. In fact, the policies of strengthening mass participation in secular rituals and ideological celebrations were carried out in the context of serious attacks on the Protestant church and its organizations during the first post-war decade. The criticisms proceeded along several lines, including the systematic accusation of the church and clergy of collaboration with the Nazis, and its labeling as a major obstacle to the social and economic progress of the German people. Although the East German government did not strictly follow the Soviet model of religious persecution with the closing of churches and imprisonment of religious figures (Baum 1996, 2), beginning in the late 1940s there were clear indications of wide-scale propaganda against the Protestant church and the weakening of the church's internal autonomy. The churches held their own meetings and services and had the liberty to make decisions on their own policies, but at the same time were a regular target of criticism with regard to their ‘negative’ influence upon the population, and especially on the youth. The situation worsened seriously after 1949, when, as part of the policy of intensive ‘Stalinization,’ the church was seen as a major
competitor of the East German state in winning over “the hearts and minds of the next generation” (Ross 2000, 78). The confrontation found its expression in the interventions and prevention of various church events by the police, the dismissals of Christian teachers and the limitations on Christian students in terms of education and professional development, the abolishment of religious instruction in schools and the compulsory atheist teaching in the schools after the educational reform of 1951.

The major focus of attack in the late 1940s and 1950s was the Junge Gemeinde Protestant youth organizations, which were considered to be a key obstacle to the expansion of the influence of the Party and the FDJ among the youth. The organizations were first accused with preventing the East German youth from devoting themselves entirely to the FDJ, and various church youth events were then obstructed in the 1950s, followed by the official position, from the summer of 1952, officially regarding the Junge Gemeinde as a “criminal organization” (Ross 2000, 80). The peak of the campaign against the role of religion for East German youth was 1953, when a series of new measures against Junge Gemeinden were passed, including a ban on all their public activities and barriers imposed on their members with regard to their receiving higher education. It was mainly with the introduction of Jugendweihe secular coming-of-age ceremony to replace Christian confirmations in late 1954, that the sharp confrontation between state and church was relaxed, at least temporarily. Although the introduction of this program put another form of pressure on the churches as it divided Christians at the grass-root level from the church hierarchy (Madarász 2003, 47), it marked a point after which the official assault of SED on the church gradually subsided.

Having had its origins in the free-thought traditions of German secular societies in the 19th century and facing restrictions in the years of National Socialism when many Jugendweihe associations were banned, the ritual appeared as a convenient means of substituting the influence of the churches with an activity that would permit a secular initiation of the youth into socialist society.\footnote{On the history of this ritual and its transformations in East Germany, see Chowanski and Dreier 2000; Gallinat 2005; Gadow 2002; Meier 1998.} Ideas to introduce Jugendweihe as a socialist ceremony were promoted as early as 1950, but it was in 1953, following a decision from Moscow, that steps were taken to clothe this
ritual in a socialist form and to compete with the Christian confirmation ritual. Although participation in the beginning was promoted as “voluntary,” the political and social pressure was substantial – both among secular and religious communities. The low interest in taking part in this state-supported ceremony pressed the authorities to make it mandatory in 1958, introducing the *Jugendweihe* to all schools in East Germany. Introduced with the purpose of serving as a secular substitute for the church confirmation, the *Jugendweihe* was orchestrated to express the readiness of children and youth to become activists in the new social order and was in fact a public affirmation of socialism. Although promoted as nothing more than an initiation ceremony of young people into mature life, it entailed an unconcealed function of decreasing the church’s influence among the youth and of redirecting the lines of veneration towards the established communist order, sealed in the oath of defending socialism and friendship with the Soviet Union. Widely popularized in schools all over the country, the celebration included the customary elements of secular religiosity, such as oaths and marches, ritual processions of banners, and vows of a firm allegiance with the communist cause. Emblematic of its character was also the fact that the ritual was preceded by long-term training in the ruling ideology’s atheist values and materialist views, and was promoted by the government as a testimony to the eternal validity of the communist experiment in the GDR.

The secularization of public life in East Germany went far beyond the separation of religion from education and the introduction of secular forms into the school curriculum. The agenda of “rooting out” of religious rituals and their substitution with secular forms of public activities touched upon all spheres of social and private life. Whereas several religious holidays suffered the attacks of the anti-religious propaganda, the communist calendar was complemented with official holidays such as May 1 and the day of the October revolution, as well as with days to commemorate communist leaders or figures of the communist resistance. The political demonstrations on such days were thus convenient tools for the public mobilization of society, while in the private sphere, the attempts of the ideology to take births, marriages, and funerals out of the religious context marked the incursion of the party into spheres principally unrelated to public concerns. Although the introduction of secular ritual patterns into private life was not as successful as in most other East European countries due to the resistance and opposition of the Protestant church and its
organizations, it remained a goal that the East German government would continue to pursue in the course of the following decades.

In light of this network of secularized activities for the glorification of the new establishment, issues of the popular perception and involvement stick out with particular sharpness. Although it will hardly be possible to estimate the level of acceptance that the communist ideas found among East Germans, beyond the strongly ideologized accounts of the Party at the time, it is clear that the straight jacket of new “socialist personalities” that was ascribed to East Germans after 1945 hardly found the expected popular support. To be certain, the process of consolidating identity along ideologically sanctioned trajectories was met with a wide array of public beliefs and collective experience, individual memories and personal interpretations. A complex set of factors, related to affiliation and political position during the Nazi period, social and economic background, generation differences, etc. conditioned the varied and contradictory response to the official values promoted. While a new identity of belonging to an antifascist state seemed a convenient solution to many Germans in the immediate post-war years, the tightening measures of control and repression in the 1950s led to an increasing public disavowal of the SED policies. The reluctance of most East Germans to accept their new communist roles persisted during the entire decade after 1945, finding its overt expression in the mass emigration to West Germany before the sealing of the border, and in the popular uprising of 17 June 1953. Still, beyond any reservations, demonstrations did take place on a regular basis; public meetings in support of the communist policies occurred with a wide participation; and many young people joined the FDJ and went through their *Jugendweihe* with family support. The reasons for this differed in accordance with individual cases and personal motivations, but they certainly had much to do with the confusion about the interpretation of the recent war years, and with the willingness to manifest a new identity with relation to the new regime. However, to the extent that this encounter touched upon and sought to transform a number of socially significant identifiers in a radical way (including religious practices as well), the formal acceptance of this identity could hardly be met with enthusiasm. It is indeed this intricate connection between the restraint with regard to the propagated ideas and the formal adherence to the practices in support of the ruling ideology that marked the relationship between the party and the populace in the first post-war decade and thereafter.
Inclusion, exclusion, and secularized collective identities

From the perspective of the existence of a stark contradiction between what is believed and what is in fact performed, it may be somewhat easier to understand the effectiveness of the policies of amnesia and exclusion in certain realms in the past that public rituals and commemorative occasions demonstrated at the time. The official interpretation of the Nazi period as “part of the great battle between monopoly and finance capital on the one hand, and the political vanguard of the working class, on the other” (Fulbrook 1999, 35) conditioned a historical depiction, which excluded many realms of relevant significance. The major and most painstaking case of such exclusion was the overlooking of the Holocaust at the expense of the obsession with the antifascist resistance, and the imposition of a guilt-free approach to the Nazi crimes. The communist pride of having had a primary share in the defeat of Nazi Germany fueled a particular version of the Holocaust and its commemoration. The East German encounter with the scale of the atrocities committed did not result in a direct claim of responsibility, nor did it lead to commemorative expressions of guilt and remorse. The emphasis on the communists’ heroic struggle and resistance during the fascist period conditioned the Holocaust’s logical marginalization within a spectrum of post-war commemorative activities. Whereas, in the first years after 1945, any talk of the Holocaust was largely silenced in the Soviet zone of occupation, by the mid-1950s steps were taken for its gradual inclusion into the narrative of communist suffering and sacrifice. Probably the most illustrative and notorious example of such an interpretative reformulation was the case of Buchenwald, which was used in the first post-war years as a Soviet internment camp for political prisoners, but after 1958 was turned into a memorial site with a huge monument celebrating the fascist resistance (see Fulbrook 1999; Frank 1970). The fate of this site, which was shared by other sites where Jews were murdered on the territory of the GDR, was indicative of the policy of avoidance, ignorance, and subversive interpretation that this most traumatic event in the twentieth century found in the commemorative occasions in East Germany.

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6 On policies concerning the interpretation of the Holocaust in East Germany see esp. Herf 1997.
Aside from sustaining a particular version of the Holocaust and the Nazi crimes, the various types of political rituals and public activities of commemoration were instrumental in the coining of East German “national” identity as well – a new identity in terms of its ideological profile and distinguished from the identity on the other side of the ideological border. The political definition of the “other Germany” followed the logic of the complete alter ego, of the entirely alien capitalist state, with whom the “delicate line of common national identity” (Fulbrook 1999, 2) was mostly an unwarranted reminder. The public rituals and commemorative activities thus sought to demonstrate the separate identity of East Germany, frequently based on ideological interpretations of the past prior to the establishment of the GDR. Whereas the agenda of promoting a firm antifascist identity led to an obsession with the history of the Communist Party and its fight against fascism and capitalism, the imagining of a separate national identity conditioned a general reservation to what was a shared German national history across the ideological divide. Following a trend similar to those of the other communist countries at the time, the commemorative ceremonies of the first two decades after 1945 completely overlooked figures of national history and focused their attention exclusively on historical figures and events that were considered legitimate in ideological terms. Thus, modeling its identity on being a firmly “anti-fascist state” of workers and peasants, the East Germany of the 1940s and 1950s focused its commemorative activities upon a constrained historical scope and with a well outlined ideological profile, achieving the definition of the national community in terms of class. At the expense of the historically shaped parameters of living together and sharing a common heritage, the East German version of history prioritized the value of the communist ideals that were viewed as a firm landmark of the German war experience and as a stable ground for the joint struggle for the full achievement of communism. The construction of a separate identity was furthermore supported by the idea that a strong state would carry on and propagate these ideals, defending them from all potential enemies.

7 In fact, it was later, only in 1970s and 1980s, that a new approach to the German past as a whole was embraced, including previously neglected or criticized figures such as Martin Luther and Frederick the Great, who were co-opted in support of legitimizing the GDR in the present (Fulbrook 1999, 20).
The major aspects of public rituals and commemorative activities outlined here thus help to make out several major trends in the development of secularism in East Germany. Most importantly, it was a plan organized and implemented by the state in line with the regime’s antireligious propaganda and the materialist base of the communist ideology. Imported as a model from the Soviet Union, it found expression in its assault on the role of churches in public and private lives and created alternative forms of public activity with state sanctioned and ideologically shaped forms. Many of these were overtly defined in contrast with religious ones and served as their direct substitution. In the strongly politicized context inspired by atheism after 1945, when religion was accused of being a regressive element in support of capitalism and imperialism (and thus, in the establishment of Nazism as their apotheosis), there was a need for the public rituals and commemorative activities related to communist ideology’s most prominent figures. The discarded claims of salvation and eternal life were replaced by the promoted expectation of a forthcoming communist paradise on earth, and religious buildings and sacred sites were replaced by monuments, squares for public demonstrations, and sacred references of communist exploits, where the communion with the ideology was expected to be most fully achieved. All this vesting of the communist regime with quasi-religious symbolism in the midst of overt anti-religious policies conditioned a particular configuration between the religious and the secular in East Germany after 1945, which exercised an enormous influence on both the religious and the public spheres. Triggered by the newly established order after 1945 and undertaken as a convenient cover of legitimacy in the face of the troublesome war memories, it persisted throughout the following decades of socialism and its traces can be observed in the high extent of secularization in this part of Europe through today.

References


CHAPTER THREE

THE LIMITS OF POLITICIZATION OF THE SCHOOLS
IN THE GDR: THE CATHOLIC EICHSFELD REGION
AND THE PROTESTANT ERZGEBIRGE – A COMPARISON

Kirstin Wappler

The SED’s claim to power was an unlimited one. The party sought to control and steer all aspects of life within society as part of its utopian project of bringing about a new society with new people. This excessive overreach and the hubris of a godlike claim to total power were bound to come up against numerous limitations. These aspirations to power could not be achieved from above without difficulty and without ruptures in the system, in a process that was indeed influenced by a wide range of factors. This resulted in a certain freedom within a scope of action to do what was mandated by the system.

The churches – and due to their larger membership, the mainstream Protestant churches in particular – presented the greatest obstacle to the SED in its plans to impose its ideology. Since children and teenagers also represented the most important target group for politicization, and were at the same time still under the strong influence of the church, schools constituted the main front in the party’s struggle with the churches. The repressive actions of the SED against Christians in the schools met, in the end, with great success. While Catholics, living in a virtual diaspora, strove to ‘hibernate’ their way through the system, the Protestant Church lost nearly sixty percent of its membership in the course of the forty-year dictatorship. A few areas of the GDR proved to be relatively resistant to the eradication of religiosity among the population. This included the Upper Eichsfeld region (Obereichsfeld), which was the largest contiguous Catholic area of the GDR, and the Erzgebirge (“Ore Mountains”) region, a Protestant stronghold. The question must then arise as to how the Christians of these two areas were able to limit the influence of the SED in matters of education.1

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1 The author focused on this question in her doctoral dissertation, SED-Staat und Kirche – Grenzen der Politisierung am Beispiel von Schulen im katholischen Eichsfeld
The division of this paper into four periods follows the progression of the political measures and events that constituted turning points for Christian teachers and students. The first period spans the time between the October 1945 reopening of schools in the Soviet occupation zone through the Spring 1953 directives on the “evaluation of all high school students and teachers” and on a “complete restructuring of school types in the GDR in detailed adherence to the Soviet model.” These directives constituted a turning point in the “cleansing” of the high schools of all “elements” that veered from the SED doctrine. With the “new course,” numerous dismissals and expulsions were rescinded, and the reorganization completed in full. The events of 1954 would, however, show that the general thrust would be maintained. This would destroy, once and for all, the hopes of large sections of the population for a democratic school system, which was justified in view of the original promises of the KPD/SED, and which had begun to gain new momentum with the “new course.” These hopes had, however, already begun to be disappointed as a result of the resolutions of the second SED party congress in September 1947. This turning point marked the end of the first period of investigation. The second period was characterized in its entirety by the efforts of the SED to bring the education system under its full control, which entailed ending the churches’ influence in the area. This phase peaked in the “transition from the antifascist-democratic school to the socialist school” and the establishment of the Jugendweihe, a secular youth consecration ceremony in 1958, as well
as the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961, an external event that would serve to stabilize the entire system. A measure was introduced on 3 May 1971, shortly after Erich Honecker assumed power in the GDR, to increase restrictions on admission to the Erweiterte Oberschulen, university-path high schools. This measure served to reemphasize the exclusion of committed Christians from academic careers, just as the SED was achieving its general goal of excluding church influence from the educational system, with the Jugendweihe as its primary instrument of politicization. This accounts for the period of investigation ending in 1971. The following years would see a relaxation of the relationship between church and state, a trend that would peak in a “summit” between the SED and the Federation of Protestant Churches in the GDR (Bund der evangelischen Kirchen – BEK), with a declaration that served to provide students with access to higher education regardless of their confession. With all its potential ramifications, this was not only of particular interest to the Erzgebirge region but, due to the centralized SED policy, for the Eichsfeld as well. The third period of investigation ended in 1978 with the possible relaxation of regulations beginning in the 1978–79 school year. The fourth period ended with the peaceful revolution of November 1989. While the structures of the GDR educational system continued to exist through 1990, educational discrimination against Christians ended with the events of November 1989. In the following, we will explore the most significant observations for both of these geographical areas.

the initiation ritual as a Schulentlassungsfeier (“graduation celebration”). The name of the ceremony must have, however, appeared so bland that the founding appeal, signed by 23 “renowned personalities,” adopted the name Jugendweihe despite all objections in November 1954. (In the 1980s, the Jugendweihe movement had a staff of some 350 full-time employees and some 300,000 volunteers (Tenorth, Kudella and Paetz 1996, 217).)

5 The rulers fulfilled the church leaders’ wishes for a dialogue for tactical reasons. The self-immolation of Rev. Oskar Brüsewitz of Zeitz in 1976, and the lack of solidarity for him displayed by the BEK led to critical voices being raised within the church. The “summit” provided an opportunity to strengthen “progressive” forces, and BEK Chairman Albrecht Schönerr, in particular, while effectively demonstrating the “liberality” of the state in the public arena. The state’s concessions in ten matters were viewed as a “victory” within the BEK, but were actually neither groundbreaking nor anchored in law. On the other hand, the declaration stipulated that young Christians were not to be discriminated against in any area, that the church would be provided television time, and that church workers would receive state pensions, proving that the state felt forced to accept the church as an independent social factor. This was a factor that could “no longer be marginalized or fought, but with which one must negotiate as a loyal partner” (Pollack 1994, 295).
The Erzgebirge does not represent a uniform social milieu according to Lepsius’ model of a “social-moral milieu.” According to his model, a social structure involves common traditions, a common system of values and beliefs, and a sense of belonging together as a group of like-minded people forming a sub-culture with regard to the society as a whole, all within a contiguous area (Wehling 2002, 114; Lepsius 1993, 25–50).

In the Erzgebirge, steadfastly Protestant parishes, mostly with a mining tradition, are neighbors to more strongly secularized communities with backgrounds that are anchored in industry, commerce, and artisan trades. The Erzgebirge was, nevertheless, viewed as a staunchly Protestant region after the Second World War. This was reflected in school faculties after 1945, which were mostly Christian and middle-class.

At around the time that the SED was founded and was consolidating its power, teachers continued to enjoy a considerable amount of freedom – not least due to the schools’ extreme lack of personnel – just as Christian influences and attempts at educational reform were mostly tolerated and personnel decisions were oftentimes apolitical. An experimental school run by high schoolers was established, for example, in Zschopau under the guidance of the Christian and Social Democrat Dr. Kurt Schumann (Pehnke 2004, 207). The rigorous resolutions of the 2nd Party Conference in September 1947 against “inimical elements in the democratic school” changed this perceptibly. The party, which had, at the time, begun to define itself as the “leading power,” began to put forward an absolute claim to power in matters of education as well. This was the beginning of the transition to a “socialist school” (Baske 1998, 167). The new rulers turned Saxony (in which the Erzgebirge is located) into a center of establishing their dictatorship as it was “one of the original centers and strongholds of the German workers’ movement” (Behring and Schmeitzner 2003, 8). As a result, Christian teachers and students became the target of extreme repression, even involving various methods of intimidation. These measures were aimed at removing Christian teachers from schools to be replaced by reliable cadres, and at intimidating Christian students to such a great extent that they would turn their backs on the church – and especially the youth groups that were so brazenly attacked due to their
great influence. The struggle with the church came to a head with the 29 April 1953 directive of the Ministry of Education, ordering all high schoolers and their teachers to be evaluated by the inspectors at the Bezirk (regional district) and Kreis (local district) levels. This precipitated a wave of dismissals of Christian teachers and expulsions of Christian high schoolers. In order to gain the time necessary to hire new teachers, the Bezirk school administration ordered most of the dismissals to go into effect as of 1 September 1953. This was explained in terms such as: “Due to your unscientific teaching work, resulting from a lack of didactic training, we are obliged to terminate your contract as of 31 August 1953.” Or: “Due to insufficient scientific knowledge, unscientific historical work, and a neglect of your own ongoing didactic training, we are unfortunately obliged to terminate your contract as of 31 August 1953.”

These dismissals were not only carried out to make an impression on the public, but were also executed in such a way as to humiliate the teachers, with further negative consequences: Those dismissed were prohibited from working in schools, and their immediate dismissals were coupled with “negative comments” in their files that threatened their financial livelihoods, as this prevented them from acquiring new work in the SED state outside of the church or small private businesses. The attempts of church representatives to advocate on behalf of dismissed teachers failed mostly due to the categorical refusal of the state authorities to enter into any discussions with them (Mau 1994, 147). As those in power had planned, these repressive measures did much to intimidate the teachers. This in turn gave way to a trend toward stamping church membership with the mark of “conspiratory activity” (Ueberschär 2003, 273).

Although the Protestant students of the Erzgebirge region had to resign themselves to disadvantages verging on persecution, all of which made confessing one’s faith into a conscious decision, most of the region’s young people still remained connected to the church. While this demonstrates the deep rootedness of the population in its faith, it also reflects the continued “widespread expectation of a forthcoming

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6 STAC, BT/RdB, Abt. Volksbildung, 30413/438, Ministerium für Volksbildung (Ministry of Education), top secret instructions for Bezirk and Kreis school inspectors on the evaluation of high schools, 29 April 1953.
7 STAC, BT/RdB, Abt. Volksbildung, 30413/438, registered letter from 29 May 1953 sent by the Bezirk school council to a teacher in the Aue district.
8 ibid.
end to the GDR and especially of the opportunity to escape pressures and disadvantages by fleeing to the West” (Pollack 1994, 122).

**Eichsfeld**

The Eichsfeld region presents an ideal-typical case of a “social milieu” (Lepsius 1993, 25–50). Its status as an enclave shielded the Eichsfeld population from external influences, leading over the centuries to a sense of isolation and to a basic skepticism with regard to “intruders” (Wehling 2002, 112). The geographical seclusion of the Eichsfeld region led the rulers to view the area as a secondary goal in establishing their dictatorship. The centralist SED policy, moreover, which was better suited to a Roman Catholic diaspora, and which had no strategy for a majority Catholic region, was a boon to the Catholic milieu. The CDU (Christian Democratic Union), founded in 1945 as an “interconfessional Christian people’s party,” also provided its support. Many Catholics throughout the Soviet Zone, and in the Eichsfeld in particular, were in fact significantly involved in the founding of the party. Following the dismantlement of the Catholic “Center Party” (*Zentrum*) and the weakening of the influence of other associations during the National Socialist era, the people of the Eichsfeld worked toward reconstructing similar structures after the Second World War. The “forcible coordination” of the Eichsfeld CDU in early 1953 with the placement of external officials in the ranks of the party’s leadership was a hard blow for all involved (Klenke 2003, 53). While the local village associations lost most of their political influence, informal close-knit club-like groupings remained, as the SED had banned association activities (interview with Siegfried Wegner). Through its networks, the CDU was able to place many of its members in positions within the local district administrations, including school administrations, in the years following 1945. The school administration of Heiligenstadt *Kreis* was indeed solidly in the hands of the CDU. The church was adept in its instrumentalization of post-war hardships – the lack of training facilities and the drastic need for teachers – and offered to serve the new rulers by providing training for new teachers at its own sites.9

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9 The radical de-Nazification process had led to a dramatic lack of teachers. While eight and two-month courses were to be implemented to train new teachers, the facilities did not suffice in the least. As a result, numerous candidates were placed on teaching staffs without preparation through 1948. They received their training instead in working groups during their teaching service. Even if KPD/SED representatives would
The Catholic Church did in fact receive the state’s approval to train teachers, and until it lost this exemption in 1947, it had trained 140 new teachers in Heiligenstadt (Klenke 2003, 50).

The political leaders shied away from repressive measures in the schools, afraid of an even stronger rejection on the part of the population. The party, moreover, did not have a handle on where to start breaking up the closed Catholic milieu. Its church policy was geared toward rolling back the influence of the Protestant church; there were even plans to “liquidate” church youth groups. Even though some Catholic groups in parishes and at universities were affected by these plans, the measures against the Catholic Christians were much less drastic. The aforementioned 29 April 1953 directive of the Ministry of Education for the evaluation of all high schoolers and their teachers thus had little effect on the Eichsfeld region. There were no teacher dismissals or high school student expulsions there. 10 The lines of authority ran opposite those in the rest of the GDR. SED members were, for example, afraid to be recognized as such, and would therefore not wear the party emblem. SED members also respected the Catholic clergy highly. SED reports on the Eichsfeld were nearly all marked by a general sense of resignation. In 1954, for instance, the party confirmed the traditional ties of “all party members with the church.” 11 Many villages had no SED members, and others only a few. The Eichsfeld people’s great strengths arose from the specific characteristics of their milieu linked to a profound Christian faith. In order to maintain their closed ranks, the people of the region pushed those out who would try to force unfamiliar patterns on them, but first offered them, in a Christian manner, the chance to convert and be accepted into their society.

Thanks to the stable Catholic milieu, Catholic teachers and students in the Eichsfeld could rely on a supportive system spanning nearly all
aspects of the society. The region’s solid networks led to the marginalization of the influences set in motion in the region by the new rulers. The SED would soon conclude that it would have to make its youth programs more attractive; but lacked any ideas or points of departure to this end. The party was just as devoid of ideas when it came to reversing the strong influence of the clergy on students, parents, and teachers. The party informers would instead ask the Kreis and Bezirk administrators to be patient, as religiosity would die out only slowly without any rapid successes to be expected (Klenke 2003, 57). They concluded that the population could only be persuaded to change in the long term through educational measures and the respectful treatment of the church.

After the war, Eichsfeld students grew up in a stable Catholic milieu. The church and their parents gave the students the feeling that this would not change, and did so with confidence. The 2000-year history of the Catholic Church, which would continue to exist and not change its historical course, was one popular theme used in the sermons held in the region. The people of the Eichsfeld viewed religious instruction as a basic right, and the anti-Christian education of the SED thus as an imposition. With the majority-Catholic teachers providing a less than convincing version of the state ideology in the schools, parents tolerated it all along with the state’s Pioneer (for younger children) and Free German Youth (FDJ) movements. They, for the most part, realized that the influence of these phenomena was much too weak to be seen as any threat to Catholicism. The comparatively ‘mild’ treatment of Catholics led to a relatively anxiety-free atmosphere, in which opposition to the SED state was viewed as a sort of competition with a clear outcome. In 1954, it was practically unthinkable that the status quo would ever change in the Eichsfeld region.

II. 1955–1971

Erzgebirge

This period was marked, in its entirety, by the efforts of the SED to oust the church as a social factor, without creating the impression of an incipient new church-state struggle. The 5th SED Party Congress in

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July 1958 established that they were in a “transition from the antifascist-democratic school to a socialist school” and defined “socialist education” as being anchored in the “only scientific worldview [that is] dialectal materialism” (Geißler and Wiegmann 1996, 140). In the view of the rulers, there were still too many active teachers who refused to adopt these tenets, and further teachers would soon be dismissed. In 1958, the party made it obligatory for the children of teachers to have a Jugendweihe ceremony. Becoming an absolute prerequisite for teachers to continue teaching, they would have to register their children for the ceremony and actively campaign for its acceptance.

The process of “educating” old teachers and hiring new ones still proved to be difficult to carry out. While it was easy to “root out” Christian teachers due to their activities in the church or their negative attitude toward the Jugendweihe, some teachers who did not appear openly “negative” to the new ideology, were still not prepared to uphold the madness of SED school policy unreservedly. The schools still had numerous new teachers who had begun their careers with high ideals. Reasons for their veiled disobedience included a humanistic view of teaching, Christian middle-class roots, adherence to the merit principle, and displeasure with SED despotism. It was indeed these “old school” teachers who were able to pave the way for accomplished Christian students to be admitted to high schools by writing them positive evaluations and providing their parents with the detailed information they required. Following his 1969 evaluation review, the head of the Aue Kreis school authority criticized that the evaluations of candidates for high school preparation classes throughout the entire district did too little of relevance to the requirements that the future students would face. He added that a fundamental evaluation would be necessary in coordination with the school principals.  

There were, however, few new Christian teachers. Very few Christian high school graduates now went on to study to be teachers. Life as a teacher, which made being a committed Christian difficult, as described above, was certain to have daunted and scared off many young Christians. The Protestant churches, moreover, did not encourage their young people to attempt the balancing act between being confessing Christians and adapting to the SED regime.

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In 1958, the Jugendweihe would also be made into a prerequisite for admittance to university-track high schools. Due to unsatisfactory participation in the new ceremony, the SED sought to persuade the educated Protestant classes of its “necessity.” And the SED’s strategy did in fact meet with success, even if it was somewhat less successful than in other parts of the GDR, and in 1959, the number of confirmations fell by some 50 percent from the previous year.14

Through aggressive agitation, the party rulers were able to achieve a breakthrough with their Jugendweihe, albeit with great differences among the individual towns. There were other factors for resisting the new ceremony, in addition to the generally reduced interest in rural areas, including mining traditions, the homogeneity of the population, and the closeness of the individual parishes to the Confessing Church of the “Third Reich” period. According to the theologian Karl Barth, the Confessing Church as a resistance movement had a uniquely strong following among the laity of Saxony, and continued to be active well after the end of the Second World War (Prater 1960, 14). In the Erzgebirge, which is influenced by Pietism, the “Confessional Front” landed on fertile soil, as the “pure proclamation of the Gospel” was the main aim of both movements.15

**Eichsfeld**

The situation in the Eichsfeld had changed very little by the time the Berlin Wall was erected in 1961. The introduction of the Jugendweihe did not go unnoticed; with the support of the clergy, who had protested vehemently against the socialist ritual, several CDU school directors even called for “something to be done about the Jugendweihe.”16 While the functionaries involved were aware that “instructing teachers” was a “primary task,” they had no promising ideas on how to overcome this problem. The SED reports continually complained that the greatest difficulty continued to be posed by the CDU school principals,

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who remained silent at principal conferences or “attempted to digress to minor issues and to avoid basic questions,” due to their “major uncertainties in basic political issues.” They also had “great difficulties in clearly presenting the advantages of our schools in comparison with schools in West Germany.” The authorities did not, however, dare to remove the CDU principals from their positions, as they were looked up to as examples, and officials thus feared inciting public anger. The party officials saw a long-term perspective in their no longer installing “CDU teachers” as principals.

Not only did the region’s young people and their parents follow the advice of the church to resist the atheistic ritual, but public opinion went as far as to ostracize participants in the “sinful act” so that even the children of party members retracted their registrations or celebrated the event secretly. The former school principal Ludwig Sänger, himself Catholic, reported: “No child had a Jugendweihe in Holungen. Not one. It did take place one single time for the son of the mayor, a SED member. But he then sent his son to another school. He left quietly and secretly” (interview with Ludwig Sänger). The most important instrument used in the GDR to politicize and to reduce the grasp of the church, thus had no effect in this region (Wappler 2007, 99–105).

The failure to establish the Jugendweihe in the area was one in a series of failures, which taught the SED not to meet the Catholicism of the Eichsfeld with its usual brute force if the party was to avoid open rejection. This led to a strategy that included a relaxed approach to “normal Catholics,” while avoiding “sectarian” ideologization and attacks on “religious sentiment.” Teachers, on the other hand, received the full brunt of the party’s school policy in late 1957 with political schoolings, frequent observers sitting in on classes or inspecting school principals, as well as threats to teachers’ careers or even the careers of their children, all meant to bend the will of the people and force them into submission. The pressure placed on the CDU school principals was particularly heavy, as they also lost crucial support through the

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18 ThHStAW, BPA SED Erfurt, B IV/2/14-001, SED Erfurt Bezirk administration, Discussion of church matters on May 23, 1958 at the Gera Bezirk administration with Fritz Naumann of the Central Committee and the party officers for church matters from the Bezirke Gera, Suhl, and Erfurt, May 1958 (cited in Gruhle 2003, 109).
gradual replacement of CDU members by the district school authorities. The Catholic school directors did, however, continue to hold their ground and thus prevented the anti-Jugendweihe movement from falling apart (Wappler 2007, 91–99).

A large number of Catholics did, however, continue to serve in schools, and the clergy worked to ensure this would not change for a long period of time. While it was the official policy of the Catholic Church to repudiate the choice of particularly politicized career paths, the local clergy viewed the problem with greater pragmatism. They assigned less importance to the difficulties that religious teachers would have to face with regard to the contradictions between their own views and those of the political leaders, and more importance to the support that Catholic teachers would be able to provide to their young students.

Only a few of the teachers who were SED members were in fact of assistance to those in power; and many instead turned out to be an obstacle to the politicization process. As they were often still members of the Catholic Church, they were not keen on getting involved in political squabbles. It therefore continued to be part of central strategy to steer teachers who seemed to be ideologically reliable toward the Eichsfeld region with the long-term goal of replacing the faculty. The SED would place its greatest hopes, however, in the “Eichsfeld Plan” that was devised at the behest of the SED Central Committee in May 1959, calling for the industrialization of the structurally weak enclave, and increasing agricultural production so that it could fully supply the Eichsfeld populace (Krüsemann 2002, 88). Thousands of workers from the Karl-Marx-Stadt area were settled there to meet the sudden needs of the newly founded production combines with the help of the “atheist” proletariat, while fracturing the “Catholic agrarian milieu” (Remy 1999, 212). The introduction of the cotton industry to Leinefelde, originally a small town of 2,500 people, formed the heart of the seven-year plan, which would see it develop into a town of 10,000 within only a few decades (Krüsemann 2002, 88). The plan also focused on the expansion of the Bischofferode potash plant and the construction of the GDR’s largest cement factory in Deuna (ibid., 87). Improvements in the social and health infrastructure, new housing, schools, preschools, and cultural facilities were meant to conjure a sense of home as well as foster an appreciation for “socialist achievements.”

This staged migration allowed those in power to change the situation in the schools in Leinefelde, Bischofferode, and Deuna, now all
rapidly growing towns. Although the participation of recently arrived young people in the Jugendweihe did not exactly serve as a role model for others, with increasing annual Jugendweihe figures, the SED was able to develop a means of exerting pressure: Just as the Jugendweihe was introduced as a prerequisite for admittance to university-track high schools, party officials threatened to replace Catholics in leadership positions with party loyalists if their children did not participate in the ceremony. This method began to bear fruit in the mid-1960s with sporadic participation among Catholics. The SED was, however, not satisfied with these results, as the region’s villages remained generally adverse to the Jugendweihe. In Heiligenstadt, only 21.6 percent of the age group participated in the ceremony (Klenke 2003, 85). The Jugendweihe still entailed a loss of standing for the families in question, with even 85 party members not having their children participate in Heiligenstadt Kreis (ibid.). Fears of social isolation and divine punishment combined to prevent people from leaving the church, while keeping them in regular attendance and participating in church processions.

III. 1971–1978

Erzgebirge

The early 1970s bore witness to a thorough generational shift in the schools of the German Democratic Republic (Geißler and Wiegmann 1996, 158). A large segment of teachers who returned to work following the de-Nazification process, as well as many newer teachers, were replaced by university-trained staff. The SED was now able to generally depend on “politically reliable” school personnel as the result of this influx of party members, decades of “cleansing measures,” and the party’s expanded monitoring and reporting system. Of the remaining Christian teachers, only a small number dared to confess their faith publicly, as this continued to be cause for heightened monitoring and reprisals. Draconian psychological methods were used against teachers who refused to allow their children to take part in the Jugendweihe, methods that could only be endured with a strong and stubborn will.

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19 By comparison, the figure rose continually for the GDR as a whole, reaching 96.8 percent by 1975 before remaining stable only to dip slightly in the last years of the dictatorship ending in 1989 (Tenorth, Kudella, and Paetz 1996, p. 217).
Following the admission of the GDR to the United Nations, however, the SED did begin to shy away from politically motivated teacher dismissals, and moved on to more subtle methods of persecution and oppression, as it did in other regions as well.

Numerous young people from the Protestant educated classes continued to extract themselves from instruments of politicization, especially the *Jugendweihe* and – for young men – extended periods of military service. The authorities, by way of obtaining another means of applying pressure, continued the systematic obstruction of the education of Christian students, even as this policy began to soften as part of a more relaxed political stance. A male student’s refusal to participate in the Free German Youth (FDJ) and the *Jugendweihe* entailed his automatic exclusion from high schools, no matter how good his marks may have been, and a boy’s declaration of intent to serve his military service as a conscientious objector in a “construction unit” would also exclude him from higher education. These “reasons” could not, however, be mentioned in letters of rejection, which instead referred to a “lack of capacity,” “lacking social prerequisites in comparison with other students,” “deficits in personal development,” and “sufficient acceptable candidates.”

While the 1970s were seen as a time of political difficulties, the decade was also a high point for church youth work. Growing youth groups thrived on a well-balanced mix of Bible studies, friendly get-togethers, and thematic projects that demonstrated a clear political distance to the SED regime. In relaxing its policies, the party leadership expected the church as an institution to be in a weak and impotent position after nearly two decades of reprisals. This would, however, prove to be an errant evaluation in strongly Protestant areas. The reemergence of Protestant youth work with an external outreach would once again become a “major problem” for the SED (Wappler 2007, 207).

*Eichsfeld*

By the beginning of the Honecker era, the SED had just about completed its process of replacing the school elite in the Eichsfeld; the CDU principals who had played a major role in disrupting the politicization process, had now been replaced by SED party members. The

introduction of ideologically reliable teachers from other parts of the country, a plan that was originally viewed as a success, proved to be a mistake in many areas. A large segment of the new arrivals perceived the reserved or rejecting attitudes of the Eichsfeld population as being so unpleasant that they worked toward changing their place or even their line of work. In 1967, the SED Bezirk leadership was already able to note:

Fluctuation has been most intense in the Kreise of Heiligenstadt, Sömmerda, Worbis, Mühlhausen, and Gotha. The cause for this in the past has been the predominant hiring of university graduates who were not at home in these districts. Over the past two years, we have attempted, with a thorough and immediate program of graduate placement, to send graduates to these districts who are either from the districts or who agree to be sent there.21

This was a success for the local population – albeit one that was more or less brought about unwittingly and probably not seen as such – who were thus able to leave their children’s education in Catholic hands. On the other hand, however, this generational shift to university-trained teachers also brought about a new awareness. Catholic teachers-in-training were met with open religious hostility and experienced for the first time the full brunt of the SED regime at the elite schools. They would only then become aware of the type of balancing act it would mean to be both a Christian and in charge of disseminating SED policy. This included partial adaptation, cunning tricks, great caution, and efforts not to make any mistakes in terms of their teaching skills and knowledge. These university-trained teachers acted, as a rule, more carefully and self-consciously than their predecessors.

Within this context, the SED saw the teachers, perhaps not as ideologically sound, but as sufficiently intimidated for them to begin a new Jugendweihe campaign in autumn 1970. This included a coordinated effort combining state security, school administrations, and management committees, which all placed enormous pressure on the “dissenters” among teachers and parents in higher positions in society (Klenke 2003, 84f.). The Jugendweihe campaign would begin a period of vehement political pressure. The continued inability to establish the

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Jugendweihe encouraged the relevant officials to make up, in one drastic action, what had been “left undone” over a decade and a half. Children who refused the Jugendweihe would now have to face the disadvantages that were common in other parts of the GDR, including exclusion from high schools or from the apprenticeships that they sought. The psychological pressure was even higher for children whose parents worked in state-linked professions, and whose jobs would then be at stake. In some collectives, it was even common for the Jugendweihe to be made part of the work plan, which would be rewarded if fulfilled. As a result of such moves, the resistance to the Jugendweihe gradually died down in the early 1970s. As soon as the first “staunch Catholics” in higher positions had begun to allow their children to have their Jugendweihe, this led to a chain reaction. Once these “solid” role models gave in to the pressure, their presumably weaker coreligionists would immediately follow. At only 21.6 percent in 1972, the participation rate in Heiligenstadt Kreis would soar to 40.1 percent in 1974 and even 59.4 percent in 1975 (Klenke 2003, 85). This was, however, not the case in Worbis Kreis. While the participation rate there did rise from 21.4 percent in 1972 to 29.6 percent in 1974, it subsequently remained stable (Remy 1999, 318). The majority of those in the Kreis who participated in the Jugendweihe, it must also be noted, were in Leinefelde, which, designated as a “center of the working class,” and granted full city rights in 1969, had a Jugendweihe participation rate of nearly 100 percent. In contrast, certain villages did not even reach a 10-percent participation rate (ibid., 319), and in the villages of Gernrode, Grossbartloff, Hundeshagen, Kirchworbis, and Wingerode not a single student took part in the ceremony. The SED was indeed generally dissatisfied with the response to the Jugendweihe in the villages.

The church’s work with young people and children was not only exempt from the repression of the 1970s. The government even introduced certain relaxations of its policy, (Klenke 2003, 97), reflecting both the modus vivendi followed in the church-state relationship (Schäfer 1998, 258), and the SED’s decision in the 1970s to part with the idea of the rapid “extinction” of religion. The churches were instead viewed primarily as institutional problems, and only secondarily as worldview-related challenges (Kubina 1994, 135). The SED then began to tolerate, as a rule, all Catholic pastoral care offerings to children and young people as long as they were visibly kept to locations outside the school.
Once new teachers had filled practically all positions by the mid-1970s, teachers who confessed their Christian faith formed but a small minority. Since these few “dissidents” were mostly former appointees who were hired to fill the need for teachers right after the war, they were all soon to retire. There were very few Christians among the teaching school graduates in the 1980s so that, by the end of its time in power, the SED was not all too far away from its goal of an atheistic teaching staff. The SED also suffered its greatest disappointment when it came to loyalty to the GDR. In the 1980s, a large number of young teachers applied to leave for the West, a number large enough to threaten impasses in teaching personnel, and including many promising future leaders. In the period between January and October 1989, for example, 95 teachers applied to leave from Karl-Marx-Stadt Bezirk alone, while 67 left the GDR via Hungary or did not return from stays abroad.22 Many of them were motivated to leave for individual or materialistic reasons, or by the fact that teachers never received approval for travel to the West. And many were also moved by the chasm between the state’s demands on teachers and signs of social deterioration as reflected, for example, in student behavior. At the same time that young people were thinking in an increasingly critical manner, teachers were called upon to fight this trend with even greater political overkill.

As a result of its apparently friendly stance toward the churches, the SED could no longer afford to place sanctions on participating in church life in the schools. Coupled with the attractiveness that the Protestant church attained in the 1980s, this led to a resurgence in church youth work, reminiscent in some places of the situation immediately following the war. Parish youth groups had around 50 regular members in strongly Protestant villages such as Drebach, Grossolbersdorf, and Grossrückerswalde. These groups thrived on a well-balanced mix of Bible studies, friendly get-togethers, and thematic projects that showed a clear political distance to the SED regime. When, for example, young Christians transported Bibles in their backpacks into the Soviet Union by train (interview with

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Siegfried Martin), this was not only a form of Christian mission but also a form of protest against state socialism. Rev. Siegfried Martin reported his occasional amazement at how anxious pre-conformation students\textsuperscript{23} were to finally be old enough to enter the youth groups. In relaxing its policies, the party leadership expected the church as an institution to be in a weak and impotent position after nearly two decades of reprisals. This would, however, prove to be an errant evaluation in strongly Protestant areas. As Rev. Martin explained, the reemergence of Protestant youth work with an external outreach once again became a “major problem” for the SED. He alluded to the frequent visits by a “representative of the Kreis council,” who would say:

‘Reverend, you are overdoing the youth work. You can’t do that, the numbers are too high.’ And that always meant trouble. It came up in every single conversation. The youth work in X., it’s too much, isn’t right. They always tolerated a little church, but it shouldn’t be too much (Interview with Siegfried Martin).

Joachim Flath, a teacher at the same location, had an inside view of this situation by dint of his membership in the SED:

They always asked the question: How are they able to attract the loyalty of people, and young people, in the twentieth century with that kind of ‘unscientific work’? How can they voluntarily run there on Sundays and go to events? This raised their suspicions. And as far as the youth group is concerned, I knew a few – even back then – with whom I was in close contact, and they would always say: They did strange things there. They had parties there and tried to get the children to stick with them. They just about refused to keep in mind that they in fact conducted serious youth work, worked with children, and that they maybe addressed them as children and so forth. No, and they would, I’d say, talk about it in a rather nasty way (Interview with Joachim Flath).

The church’s work with children did indeed compete seriously with the state youth programs. Christian children filled their free time with religious instruction, youth groups, music and singing groups, and church retreats. Markus Baldauf, who, as a youth himself, assisted on church youth retreats, said that it was “much easier back then than it is today” to get children and young people to be enthusiastic, as those in charge “simply allowed them a bit of freedom, without all those

\textsuperscript{23} This refers to children in the first year of a two-year program leading to their confirmation.
The limits of politicization of the schools

The demand for church education among young people was higher than supply could provide, even as the commitment of parishioners in church youth work peaked toward the end of the 1980s. The prestige of the church as an institution grew among non-Christians as well due to the church’s work on social and environmental policy and, increasingly, due to its image as an oppositional force, all leading to greater support for the church. The church made thorough use of this advantageous situation and attained a level of freedom that would have been unimaginable only a few years earlier. The fact that the church remained unsanctioned by the state contributed, in turn, to the sense among students and their parents that the system was a moderate one, encouraging them to act more critically and with greater self-confidence. Parents no longer felt as dominated by the system, as became evident in their demands on the school.

Under these relaxed conditions, church youth work began to take off considerably. In Flöha Kreis, the head of the school authority reported a “fluctuating” degree of participation in Christian religious instruction of between 10 and 60 percent of all elementary school children. In some agricultural areas, “up to 60 percent of the children received this instruction, especially in grades 1 through 3” including particularly high numbers among the children of “collective farmers, independent craftspeople, and, to a degree, of doctors.” An August 1989 report submitted by the head of the Hohenstein-Ernstthal Kreis school authority must also have worried the SED, as participation in the church youth group had risen to levels close to that of the 1950s. While the “activities of the individual schools” differed greatly, he estimated that up to 60 percent of the students in the upper grades of the district were affiliated with a church. He also noted conditions that the SED had long believed to have been relegated to the past:

There are problems with the membership in the Pioneer organization among the children of devout parents. Church affiliations are stronger in places with schools in rural surroundings. The directors of rural schools

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are aware that many children participate in church events because they must, because their grandparents, and at times their parents demand it, and because it is part of their family ‘obligations.’

The long-term measures taken against people of faith were in fact too aggressive for the church to be able to maintain the allegiance of children and young people by dint of tradition alone. The participants in Protestant youth work included both confessing Christian youths and young people who – often without church affiliation – discovered a previously unknown realm of freedom for themselves within the institution. A series of alternative church services in urban areas, which had already been a great success in the 1970s, were directed not only to Christians but also to anyone with an interest in the church. This was continued into the 1980s as “Open Evenings” and took on a clear oppositional quality. Rev. Dr. Theo Lehmann of Karl-Marx-Stadt, who was seen by the state as one of the “most dangerous evangelists,” possessed a kind of magnetism. While at times theologically questionable in their simple presentation of the Christian faith, these events provided a vent for pent up aggressions and thrived, to a large degree, on the amazement at what was now possible to say openly without fear of reprisals.

Barriers continued, however, to hinder students who refused to participate in military service or training, and students who expressed opinions that differed from SED doctrine. Not participating in the Jugendweihe ceremony did not, however, continue to pose any obstacles on an automatic basis. Due to a strong drop in young people’s interest in receiving their Abitur diploma and then going on to university, the political leadership was often forced to accept students who did not have their Jugendweihe into Abitur programs. Teachers were now more willing than in previous decades to support strong students regardless of the degree of their political compliance.

Eichsfeld

In 1985, the SED was able to report that “all 33 school directors in Worbis Kreis were SED members.” The SED deemed the teaching staff of the region to be “solid” by the early 1980s, and no longer saw Catholic

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26 ibid.
teachers as a danger. Teachers saw that not allowing their children to participate in the Jugendweihe constituted a risk to their own professional careers.

The SED reported a continual growth in the Eichsfeld Jugendweihe participation figures in the mid-1980s. At the same time, the discrepancy between cities and small towns with a Catholic population of between 89 and 98 percent became stronger than in previous decades (Remy 1999, 218). The percentage of students participating in the Jugendweihe in 1980 differed between 97 percent at the POS Leinefelde, a town that had been secularized with a Catholic population of around 55 percent, and zero percent in the municipalities of Küllstedt and Effelder (Remy 1999, 318f).

While the church’s outreach to adults encouraged mostly open discussions on state socialism, and mass processions and pilgrimages would presage the impending social changes, Margot Honecker’s education policy remained as fundamentalist and militaristic as ever. This created an onerous and practically unsolvable dilemma for Catholic teachers due to the continuous political burden that they shouldered. While they, on the one hand, woreied and despaired at the great disparity between political platitudes and reality, they also feared potential repression on the part of the SED too much to risk any clear departure from the official line. Martin Summer remembered his “entire socialist existence as a teacher” as being occupied with “collecting and identifying staff opinions and moods.” Certain teachers always carried out a sort of monitoring function with regard to the other staff members. For example, when he canceled his subscription to Neues Deutschland, the official SED daily newspaper,

…the boss called me to have a usual cadre discussion. … He asked me: What newspapers do you read? And he then looked at a piece of paper which said exactly which newspapers, that I canceled my subscription to Neues Deutschland, and which professional journals I did subscribe to, etc. Today, one would of course say: ‘You know, that is none of your business.’ But back then I had to come up with a long explanation for why I cancelled Neues Deutschland. So I said ‘Yes, I should consider subscribing again’ and left it at that and got out of it that way (Interview Martin Sommer).³⁰

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²⁹ Margot Honecker was the minster of education from 1963 to 1989 (Schroeder 1998, 560).
³⁰ Lists of the professional journals and daily newspapers read by teachers began to be compiled in the 1950s (ThHStAW, RdB, Abteilung Volksbildung, V 133, Bl. 53).
Catholic teachers were in a permanent conflict between adaptation and self-assertion, and, increasingly, a complete dearth of future prospects – both in relation to their own careers and to society at large. Dissatisfaction spread even among those SED-member teachers who examined the ideology and state socialism with a critical eye. This often led to political apathy and resignation, as well as expressions of sympathy for the Catholic milieu, which, by the 1980s, no longer appeared outmoded to non-Christians, but instead seemed to shine with modernity and authenticity.

The discrepancy between cities and small towns regarding the Jugendweihe led to a wide difference in experience among the students of the region. While the SED was forced to admit non-Jugendweihe students to high schools in many villages due to the lack of candidates who had in fact had the ceremony, the admissions process was more of an arbitrary decision in the cities, just as it was elsewhere in the GDR. These students were mostly rejected even despite excellent schoolwork, and were only accepted in a few cases. In those villages that were resistant to the Jugendweihe, the SED had to do without what was otherwise an important instrument of pressure to bring the students into political line. In numerous village schools, children enjoyed a nearly laissez-faire atmosphere – depending on the political zeal of the staff, and the individual director in particular. In these villages, the Catholic milieus were much more self-confident than in cities or in areas that had received a considerable influx of people from other areas. The people were proud of low levels of participation in the Jugendweihe, leading to a sort of self-righteousness with regard to the few Catholics who did not have the courage to opt out of the state ritual. One son of two teachers was subjected to precisely this sort of treatment. First, he participated in the Jugendweihe against his will only because his parents feared for their jobs. Although he neither took part in the preparation courses nor celebrated the occasion, he was still the target of reprisals. As his mother recounted:

He was an altar boy and a lector and then – it was in fact just before Easter – he wasn't allowed to go [to carry out his church duties], and that was terrible. And then he had to suffer terrible abuse from the local boys, he was beaten up, and came home one day with a big 'J' on his back for 'Judas.' That was terrible for him (Interview with Christa Frohne).

Church youth work formed the main path to the church for Catholic children and teenagers. Numerous volunteers worked alongside priests.
and chaplains in this service. In the mid-1980s, the church established a sophisticated program of events with even more variety than before. Since prayer and faith sessions no longer were received with great interest, the church adapted to new needs: Amateur theater groups, gospel singing, and dance events were just as popular as “discussion groups on young people's life issues.” Discussion evenings on topics such as Marxism-Leninism, (as recorded in a Stasi report, Klenke 2003, 101), paved the way for a new critical way of thinking that was expressed in an increased resistance to the Jugendweihe in 1988 and 1989. The church made great efforts on the construction of youth centers, which the state did not impede due to its fixation on foreign exchange. As the atheism researcher Olaf Klohr noted in his “Eichsfeld study,” the “excellent material basis” played no minor part in making the church’s offering as attractive as they were (in Klenke 2003, 102).

Conclusion

The vastly different preexisting conditions in the two regions had long-term effects on the intensity of the politicization process there. The Erzgebirge region was one of the SED’s first target areas, while the Eichsfeld was more of a secondary target in the establishment of the dictatorship. The people of the Eichsfeld also benefited from the centralized policies of the SED, which were geared toward a minority Catholic Church in the diaspora, and which had no strategy to come to terms with majority Catholic areas.

As an ideal-typical case of a “social milieu,” and as an enclave shielded from outside influences, the Eichsfeld region was more able to resist the SED incursions. The Erzgebirge region, by contrast, was surrounded by and broken up by industrial areas, with “pure” Protestant areas bordering on more strongly secularized towns. This provided the SED with sufficient leverage it needed to establish its dominancy. These very different preexisting conditions would have long-term effects on the politicization process.

The efforts that the Catholic elite of Eichsfeld made toward filling positions of responsibility with Catholics, and to be represented in all areas of society, continued all throughout the dictatorship era. This was done in the context of the desire to form a “fortress” in the struggle against the politicization process. The Eichsfeld region, at the same time, as an enclave, thrived on networks that remained stubbornly
intact. The deeply rooted familial relations and the interconnectedness of all its institutions proved difficult to surmount. Efforts at adaptation as a means of keeping the Catholic milieu stable and influential was viewed as the lesser of a choice of evils. This became clearest in the encouragement of young Catholics to become teachers. It is also within this context that we must consider the tolerance of Catholic SED members toward the church.

The Protestant Christians of the Erzgebirge focused on the maintenance of their congregations, but did not, through the early 1970s, link this to any claims to social influence. During this phase of mass repression against all things religious, any cooperation in the construction of the state system that went beyond what was absolutely necessary seemed to be irreconcilable with the Christian faith. Few had accepted the necessity to adapt, as demanded by the teaching profession. And thus, young Christians rarely signed on for this balancing act. Nor did the church make use of this avenue in order to gain influence – or in fact to provide support for Christian students.

In both regions, church youth work attained great significance for the Christian resistance, such as it was. Church youth programs, buoyed by the great commitment of professionals and volunteers alike, were consistently more attractive than state programs. In the 1980s, Protestant youth work had a particularly strong external pull and provided a protective setting for the opposition movement, while continuing to pursue missionary goals as well.

In sum, the Catholic milieu of the Eichsfeld region remained stable throughout the SED dictatorship. The Jugendweihe, the SED’s most important method of politicization, did not take hold there for many years, and even after its establishment in the region, never satisfied the SED in terms of its acceptance, with figures well below average for the GDR. While the Catholic milieu of the Eichsfeld benefited from the large number of Catholic teachers and the reduced threat to its faith, the Protestant church of the Erzgebirge had to come to terms with a serious drop in its membership. The Jugendweihe took root there quickly and reached a participation rate just below the GDR average everywhere but in a few rural areas. Considering the difficulty of the political situation, a large number of communities were able to make outstanding strides toward resisting politicization. This proves that the authorities overestimated the power of politicizing education, as major and effective parts of the socialization process continued to take place within the family and within church parishes, influencing the children in the long term.
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Explanations for the success of the East German secularization process mainly focus on the aspect of political repression (Daiber 1988; Pollack 1994; Neubert 1998a).¹ Indeed, there is evidence that one of the main reasons for the massive decline in religious affiliation and belief could be seen in the state’s efforts to suppress religion in general, and church activities in particular: Since the early 1950s, legal security for the churches and their freedom to present themselves in the public sphere were limited and church members faced discrimination in various realms of daily life. The rate of people renouncing their church membership thus rose, especially in times of fierce political repression.

In this explanation, the renouncement of church membership is mainly conceptualized as assimilation through external coercion. However, it fails to explain the resilience of religious attitudes all throughout the German Democratic Republic (GDR) under the authority of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) or, for that matter, the great success and persistence of atheism after its end in 1989. Assuming that a change of religious beliefs – as any other form of cultural change – cannot take root through manipulative acts alone, further research should focus on how public conflicts between religion and politics as well as the SED’s anti-religious policies could gain subjective plausibility at the level of individual consciousness.

¹ For a more detailed discussion of different secularization theories in conjunction with the debates on religious change in East Germany see Karstein et al. (2006) and Pollack (2003).
Whereas the institutional conflict between the state and the churches has been well documented and analyzed (see Dähn 2003), questions as to (non-)religious socialization, ways of dealing with the conflict at the individual or family level and forms of resilient subjectivity remain unanswered. There is still a dearth of knowledge on the integrative power of the socialist (materialistic and atheistic) worldview (Weber 2006, 212; Ihme-Tuchel 2003, 112). With respect to these questions, statistical analysis offers only limited insights, as it fails to capture the subtleties of how the doctrines of Marxism-Leninism or religion are perceived, transformed, and adapted in the context of the complex social environments of individuals and families.

The explanatory force of quantitative methods reaches its limits when issues are concerned that involve the intergenerational transmission of belief systems and their influence on the organization of everyday life. The success of the SED’s critique of religion and its attempts to impose a new, secular Weltanschauung remains a mystery if the transformational processes of subjective worldviews are not taken into account.

I therefore propose an alternative model based on a different theoretical framework. I suggest that the conflict between the state and the churches after 1945 should be seen as a conflict involving symbolic power and authority. Both classical and contemporary social theories (Weber [1920] 2005; Stollberg-Rilinger 2005) point out that physical repression alone is insufficient to ensure regime stability, stressing the need for a symbolic, value-based foundation of power. This symbolic foundation plays a particularly important role in legitimizing political leadership, as the chances for successfully asserting political interests largely depend on the ability of leaders to mobilize norms and ideals, and to obtain the consent – passive or active – of their constituency (Nedelman 1986). This calls into question the assumption that a dictatorial regime can exist – and persist – without any positive identification among the population, as Rainer Lepsius (1994) suggests. According to Lepsius, the conformity of the population of the former GDR was the result of the state’s powerful bureaucratic structures rather than any ideological persuasion. Similarly, Detlef Pollack (1998) cautions against overestimating ideology as an

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2 To be resilient indeed means being habitually disposed to disobedience and opposition.
instrument for integration, positing that conformity was a strategic response to the fear of state sanctions. These arguments are valuable but incomplete contributions, as they cannot explain the strong efforts of the government to propagate the socialist idea. The constitution of the new communist state was, from the outset, based not only on a political but, by necessity, on a symbolic revolution as well. This new symbolic order was needed to legitimatize the new social order and its self-appointed representatives (Thaa et al. 1992). This, however, was only possible by simultaneously delegitimizing any inherited (religious) authorities and their worldviews. The early years of the GDR can thus be construed as an intensified conflict over the ‘right’ worldview and ideology.

In post-World War II Germany, the total breakdown of the Nazi political system necessitated society to be fully reoriented, thus providing an ideal environment for the SED’s sociopolitical project. However, the efforts to establish a new symbolic framework were not limited to the religious sphere, but indeed targeted all levels and segments of society. Slogans such as “societal improvement,” “equality,” and the “ruling position of the working class” – all of which played a fundamental role in the GDR’s symbolic framework – remind us that issues concerning the economy, scientific progress, and social structure were at the heart of this campaign. Art and science also received particular attention as fields of ‘symbolic production.’ The SED worked toward utilizing these fields as a means of accomplishing its societal ideals. Religion and the churches thus became a negative allegory and were stigmatized as “out of fashion” or “reactionary” whereas the SED presented itself as progressive and enlightened. Since the 1950s, the struggle for the socialist ideal had unmistakably become one for a materialist worldview and against religious belief (Hoffmann 2000, 157).

Discourse analysis alone will, however, not suffice in an attempt to understand the interdependency between the conflict at the macro-level and the reactions on the micro-level along with their consequences for the (in-)stability of society. Research in this field should be broadened to include the experiences and perceptions of the conflict’s main protagonists, at the level of both experts (whether pastors or politicians) and laypeople. Power should be conceptualized as a social

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3 For an initial overview see Beate Ihme-Tuchel (2003), for a more detailed discussion, see e.g. Hoffmann (2000) and Schmidt-Lux (2003, 2008).
practice instead of as a static institutional arrangement (Lüdtke 1991), revolving around an interdependent relationship between rulers and the ruled, and legitimized by its repeated enactment (Lindenberger 1999).

In this respect, the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1996, 2000, and 1990) offers a promising theoretical framework. Bourdieu’s theoretical concepts (such as *habitus* or *field*) as well as his empirical fieldwork were deeply influenced by his sustained interest in questions of symbolic violence and symbolic power. In this context, his examination of Ernst Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms ([1944] 1953) is of particular interest. Bourdieu was interested in the social impact of the symbolic forms described by Cassirer, and redefines symbolic forms as fields of symbolic production, understood as structured social arenas in which people maneuver to compete over desirable resources as well as the definitions of social realities. In general, fields are systems of social positions structured by internal power relations, with protagonists struggling over the appropriation of certain types of capital – capital being whatever is seen to be of significance to the social actors. These actors, their practices, and their experiences are of special interest with regard to questions of symbolic authority. For Bourdieu, the structure of a social field reflects the protagonists’ *habitus*, i.e. lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought, and action. Individual actors develop these dispositions in response to the objective conditions they encounter. This interdependence of habitus and field evens the ground for the efficiency of symbolic structures representing the power relationships within a field.

Compared to other societal fields, the fields of symbolic production are involved much more strongly in the production of basic frames and of images that govern perceptions of the social world. They thus effectively take part in establishing fundamental principles of “vision and division,” and hence in constructing society. From Bourdieu’s point of view, the function of the religious field is to provide people with reasons for their form of existence, and for their (social) position in the world. Unlike secular professionals such as alternative medical practitioners, marriage counselors, and psychoanalysts, religious professionals achieve this in a special way, in that they transform social divisions into supernatural divisions of the cosmos (Bourdieu 1987, 1990).

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4 Cassirer’s symbolic forms include myth, religion, language, the arts and sciences.
Religion therefore legitimizes existing social positions by obscuring economic inequalities: a process Bourdieu refers to as ‘consecration.’ This process stimulates a special relationship between the religious and the political field in terms of ‘shared’ governance. In his articles on the religious field, Bourdieu places primary stress on this kind of complicity between religious and political specialists. However, if one takes a look into the history of religion, the opposite case appears likely as well: Instead of sharing governance, we may depart from assumptions about competition or conflict between religious and political experts over the legitimate exercise of the power to modify, in a deep and lasting fashion, the practices and worldviews of laypeople. In such cases, the religious field becomes a place of privilege to call into question political authority and legitimated worldviews, and to provide the laity with strategies of subversion. This reflects the societal constellation in the GDR precisely.

The situation after 1945: The East German religious field and the Catholic position

As already intimated above, the defining feature of the relationships between the religious field and the field of politics in the GDR was entrenched conflict rather than complicity. Intent on replacing religious actors and institutions, the state competed with religion over ideological hegemony while the former made claims to fulfilling hitherto religiously defined societal functions. The religious field nevertheless continued to exist, even as it occupied an increasingly marginalized position.

The primary religious actors were the Protestant and the Catholic churches, followed at distance by smaller groups such the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the remaining Jewish communities. With Protestants...
making up roughly 80% of the total population, the territory of the GDR corresponded with the geographical center of Protestantism. The numerical growth of the Catholic Church, brought about by the influx of refugees from the East, was largely reversed by the onward migration of these new congregants that continued until the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961.

In the following section, I focus on outlining the positions of the mainline Christian churches. Due to their numerical strength, both became primary targets of political regulation to which they responded in distinctly different ways. Redefining its social place after the end of the Second World War, the Protestant churches came to view themselves as a moral authority, i.e. as a guardian of ethical standards in society (Daiber 1992, 75), independent of state institutions and open to all social groups (Meier 1988; Pollack 1994). Protestantism thus chose to place itself beyond the political battles of party politics, staking out a claim to answers for existential questions, including a perceived mandate for educational work. Arguments would recur, however, on questions such as how social critique and political intervention in the public sphere should be reconciled with institutional autonomy (Pollack 2001, 79). Diverging and even contrary positions, supported by internal structures, co-existed even as the balance of power amongst them continued to change. While one faction advocated a comparatively moderate approach towards the ruling party, particularly from the 1970s onward, other more critical voices would also surface time and again, first in the 1950s and later with renewed strength during the 1980s.

By contrast, the Catholic Church’s concern lay from the outset predominantly with the maintenance of its ministry, pastoral care, and ecclesiastical functions (Haese 1998, 20). In the face of the emerging dictatorship, the church’s conduct was informed by the unconditional pursuit and defense of the interests of the church as an institution (Böckenförde 1973, 118). The fact that the same principle had already been pursued as a top priority during the National Socialist era reveals the far-reaching continuity of church policy. Faith, ethical issues, education, the family, as well as charity and religious freedom were all, however, seen as legitimate fields of church engagement (Haese 1998, 21). The church proactively defended its position particularly with regard to interference with its “internal affairs,” as witnessed for instance in its attitude towards the Jugendweihe coming-of-age
ceremony. Following the massive decrease in the number of confirmations during the 1950s, the Protestant churches had abandoned their resistance, allowing individuals to combine both rituals. The Catholic Church, by contrast, never retreated from its intransigent position, according to which confirmation and Jugendweihe were mutually exclusive options.

This resistance, however, and the policy of the Catholic Church in general, were based more on ecclesiastical than on political grounds. Criticizing the regime was thus not regarded as a crucial matter. In the words of Bishop Otto Spülbeck, the Catholic Church regarded the GDR as an “alien house,” whose foundations were considered morally wrong. In his speech at the national Catholic Convention (Katholikentag) in 1956, Spülbeck declared that, while the church would not participate in the construction of this house, it would nonetheless cooperate to ensure that its inhabitants could live in peaceful coexistence. In other words, the existence of irreconcilable differences in fundamental ideological questions should not foreclose compromises and arrangements on practical issues. This statement characterizes the basic position of the Catholic Church, which changed little over the 40 years of the GDR. This ambiguous position paved the way for the gradual integration of the Catholic Church into the state-dominated society, notwithstanding the fundamental suspicion it maintained with regard to the ideology upon which the society was created (Kösters and Tischner 2005, 26).

Positions and pathways of East German families within the religious field – three Catholic case studies

I have argued above that further research should focus more strongly on the micro-level, and thus on questions as to how the conflicts

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8 *Jugendweihe* is the secular coming-of-age passage ritual that was established and supported by the state.

9 The *Katholikentag* is a bi-annual gathering of German Catholic clergy and laypeople, which provides a forum for the discussions of questions of faith raised by contemporary political and social developments.

10 Of course one could find different positions within the East German Catholic Church and an ongoing debate on the appropriate strategy, but in the end church policy generally followed strategies of self-assertion and political abstinence (Haese 1998).
between churches and the state interfere with biographies and family lives. That implies – in Bourdieu’s terms – analyzing people’s habitus and the interdependency between habitus and the religious field. In this context, religious perceptions, attitudes, and practices are particularly significant. It is most likely that various types of resilient subjectivity are situated at the subjective level, not least because of what Bourdieu has called the ‘hysteresis effect’: Especially the older segments of the population were deeply influenced by inherited, non-socialist societal structures and – in conjunction with this – schemes of perception, thought, and action. Even as the old societal structures disappeared, however, the people’s habitus persisted.\(^{11}\) The SED’s all-embracing program of reeducation was indeed not quite as successful as expected. For this reason, explorations into the subjective dimensions have to take the hysteresis effect as well as methods of successful reorganization into consideration. Whether a new doxa emerges, whether the new symbolic framework will prevail over inherited attitudes, nevertheless remains an open question. The answer can only be revealed through accurate empirical research, which can also serve to reveal how far and how deep the East German secularization process went.

In the following, the supposed types of resilient subjectivity will be examined by means of an analysis of family life. Families can be considered major locations for coping with social change. Wherever inherited practices and new demands (coming from the state and its institutions) collide, families are forced to bring different requirements into harmony. In the context of this study, they had to decide whether to give up or maintain their religious affiliation. In doing so, families could become effective agents for the promotion of governmental claims to build a new areligious society. But the opposite was probable as well. In those cases, families function as protective bastions, keeping the new atheist schemes of perception, thought, and action at bay.

In the following chapter, I introduce three East German families.\(^{12}\) At the end of World War II, these families were all embedded into

\(^{11}\) The effect of hysteresis can be characterized as the potential dissonance between people’s expectations and reality (Engler 2003). It is therefore a possible source of obstinacy.

\(^{12}\) This article is based on a research project carried out in Leipzig from 2003 to 2006. We studied how East German families dealt with the anti-religious politics, policies, and discourses of the GDR, how they actively participated in them or refused and resisted them, and how they coped with the new situation after the transformations
the tightly integrated Catholic milieu with its distinctly anti-socialist atmosphere; and all of them adhered strongly to Catholic norms and values. Their future pathways would, however, differ from each other. By focusing on Catholic families, I address only a small segment of the religious field. Nevertheless, the family interviews reveal that, in expressing their positions, Catholics take the real or perceived attitudes and practices of Protestants into account. The analysis of one subfield thus simultaneously provides a perspective on the rest of the field and its protagonists as well as on the general conflict between the political and religious fields. The analysis of these cases reveals the resistance the state faced when attempting to establish its new symbolic order, and reveals typical ways of coping with this demand. The three selected family case studies are therefore not weighed in terms of being representative, but are typical with respect to common positions in the religious field. In my analysis, I concentrate on the oldest generation (born in the late 1920s) and their children (born in the early 1950s) without taking the young generation (born in the 1970s) much into account.

The Müllers: “One can serve only one lord”

Together with their son and his family, the elder Müllers live in a small village in the Magdeburger Börde region, a rural, predominantly Protestant area. The Catholic family of the grandfather, who was born in the late 1920s, originally emigrated there from Eastern Prussia to find work in farming. Once completed his schooling, the now elder Mr. Müller received training with the railways. Following the Second World War, however, he would go on to work as a roofer until his retirement. The family grandmother migrated to the village shortly after the end of the Second World War. Also Catholic, her family originated from the German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia. She reported her perception of the experience of dislocation as being one of abasement and a loss of control. She was also not able to finish her apprenticeship due to the war. The two grandparents met each other in the late 1940s and married in 1950. Marrying as Catholics, however, they remained outsiders in this predominantly Protestant region. In the of 1989. The project approached the logic of these processes of transformation by way of family interviews, where representatives of three family generations collectively related their family histories.
following years, they had two children (one of whom is the family father of this study), and purchased a small house, even as their living standard remained low.

During this time, the grandfather was offered a well paying job at the local police station. Although this would have been an opportunity to improve his life circumstances considerably, he dismissed the offer. Justifying this decision, he pointed to the moral superiority of manual labor over administrative work, and commented: “(...) they would have given me a uniform and I would have stood there in the village on the corner. The folks would have watched me earning money for nothing.” The grandmother also supported this view: “We preferred to work ourselves hard on the land.” Elaborating on that theme, their son suggested: “If you wanted to work there, you had to be able to walk over dead bodies, quite literally.”

This therefore brings a moral quality into the equation at hand. In order to follow the Ten Commandments, one would have to abstain from this type of work, as one would otherwise be forced to betray one’s mother and father, or others. This reveals a mindset adverse to the state and its institutions that is typical for both the oldest generations but also younger people in almost the same manner. In light of the contradictions between the perceived job requirements and the family’s ethics, the job offer can only appear as an “indecent proposal.” The ideological claims of the communists were strictly dismissed and religious education understood as a family matter. From this perspective, it was to be expected that the couple would raise their children in a Catholic spirit. The intransigent stance of the family is epitomized in the controversies concerning the father’s participation in the Jugendweihe, for when it comes to ideology, compromises are essentially unacceptable. This attitude is reflected in the grandmother’s comment on the decision: “That is out of the question. We are Christians [...] we can only serve one lord.” They rejected the Jugendweihe as a commitment to another “lord,” even at the expense of trouble and disadvantages, and these would indeed soon follow. The school administration refused to promote the father to the next grade and announced that it would prevent him from receiving further

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13 The grandfather’s negative view of the GDR is fuelled further by the Communists’ adoption of Nazi ritual practices for their own purposes. The Fahnenweihe turned into the Jugendweihe, and, from his point of view, the two systems also differed little in relation to issues of tolerance for political dissent.
training. As if to prove the opposite, the family grandmother later proudly asserted that he did eventually manage to complete all ten grades of his secondary school, and was later able to start up his own business. This comment reflects a central dimension of the familial habitus: that one has to stand up for his or her convictions even in the face of stigmatization and discrimination, for in the end things will reverse and God will reward the faithful. According to the family grandmother, all mishaps should be interpreted as divine tests, as situations in which those who wish to go to heaven must prove themselves in this world. This includes resisting the temptations of the devil. The father has seen Protestants as particularly prone to “rotten compromise” since they decided to accept the combination of Jugendweihe and confirmation. He suggested, moreover, that, after 1989, the Protestant Church had become a place of refuge for former party members. But the family has even criticized Catholics whenever they gave in to compromises with the state. The father has, in particular, lamented the lack of historical consciousness on the part of many Catholics who, as he insists, had opportunistically given up their own identities.

This moralistic discourse, dominated by the older and the middle generations, places religious integrity above social integration: According to this discourse, one must accept one’s own social marginalization for reasons of faith. The ideological exclusiveness promoted by the state from the fifties onward, is now being mirrored in the grandparents’ decision to remain “faithful to the church” and God alone. There were, however, also points of contact with the system. This is evidenced when the father describes how he was a member of the youth organization of the GDR. Like the army, he sees them as places of discipline, and thus as ideologically neutral institutions for the inculcation of non-political virtues.

Whereas the father largely adopts the stance of the parents and fully identifies with their Catholic history of displacement, the views of the granddaughter reflect an incipient change in the familial habitus. The elements of suffering and oppression that were still pivotal for the older family members have begun to lose their significance. Nevertheless, Catholicism continues to be the primary focus of orientation. She insists on her continued commitment to “the cause” of the church despite the fact that much of her energies are currently consumed by her own young family and the construction of their new house. Keeping the religious heritage alive is, as she stresses, chiefly a family matter.
Both grandparents in the Kuntzig family were born in the mid-1920s in Silesia, which would later become part of Poland. Initially, the grandmother had planned to become an agricultural educator but her plans were thwarted by the war. The grandfather worked as a tax collector and was later conscripted into the military. Both came to the GDR as refugees while their parents decided to stay in Silesia. After their arrival, the grandmother worked at menial jobs in the northern state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania but would later complete her training as a laboratory assistant. After being released from British captivity in 1947, the grandfather moved to live with an uncle near Leipzig and began working for the fiscal authorities. While at first this may appear to have been an attractive choice, it turned out that the job required a political commitment, with him becoming a member of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). He thus placed himself in greater proximity to the system than the Müllers who took pride in never having belonged to any political party during the communist period. This was, however, a strategic choice that served to lessen any further pressures to become politically involved with the regime. As a Christian party, the CDU appeared to be a lesser evil. The grandfather cancelled his membership at the end of his working life in 1989.

Interconfessional marriage was out of the question for the family. The grandfather explicitly mentions the difficulties he had in finding a spouse, as they were both Catholic and determined to have a Catholic marriage. They eventually got to know each other at the 1956 national Catholic convention in Cologne, which rendered questions about “the other’s milieu” redundant. Following their civil wedding in the GDR in 1958, they would go to Poland to celebrate their church wedding with their parents. In terms of religiosity, the grandfather said, they were essentially in full agreement. After the birth of the children in 1959 and 1962, the grandmother stopped working, but would later become increasingly engaged in school affairs. In a way, this engagement was meant to compensate for their children’s abstention from the Jugendweihe ceremony. From the grandmother’s point of view, the success of this strategy is evidenced in the fact that her son was allowed to complete his Abitur secondary school diploma, which is a prerequisite for admission to universities. In order to extricate himself from the political pressure exerted on him, the grandfather left the fiscal authority to work for different companies. Intent on improving his economic situation, he graduated from an engineering program in the late 1950s.
and was later chiefly employed in the area of electronic data processing. There, his membership in the Christian party continued to serve to excuse him from training courses in socialist ideology. The price he paid for this was none other than the need to abandon his prized career ambitions. Similar to the Müllers, the Kuntzigs are characterized by a certain defiance towards the anti-religious state. “The more unfriendly [the Russians] or the SED were to the church,” the grandfather recalls, “the more actively religious I became.” The grandparents of the two families, however, diverged with regard to how they dealt with the situation. While the Müllers focused on strategies of mostly passive endurance, the Kuntzigs exhibited a greater will to actively engage with their life circumstances and to shape their immediate social environment. Notwithstanding their basic antagonism against the system, Catholics are citizens as well, and thus people with certain liabilities to the state. The example of the family mother’s volunteer work at her children’s school illustrates this pattern of weighing these differing concerns. Elaborating on this point, the grandfather underlines:

We have been loyal because we have to live in this state. The church itself (…) even God himself says, ‘Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.’ And therefore we can’t reject the state. We have to serve it in a positive manner.

It is for this reason that the family refrained from articulating their criticism “aggressively.” This also entails a certain reservation against those who criticized the system openly and faithfully reflects the official church discourse of a common “house.”

The following generations were also driven by the rationality of making the best of the given circumstances while keeping in mind that “if at some point you can’t stand it anymore, you can still apply to leave the country.” During the GDR period, the family’s son and his wife managed to embark on professional careers outside of the mainstream. A technician by training, the father sought to become an actor and waited for eight years to enroll in drama school, while working in a hospital. There, he made the acquaintance of the family mother who was a midwife from a Protestant background. Interconfessional marriage had indeed ceased to be a problem for this generation. In the interview, the hospital emerges as an alternative social space, as a shelter for dissidents. More than the grandparents, they situated themselves within an oppositional milieu and participated in public actions such as demonstrations against environmental pollution, and went on to join the famous “Monday demonstrations” at an early date. This can
be seen as a type of Protestantization since the Protestant church went much further than the Catholic Church in providing a home to movements that articulated their political criticism in overt manners. The couple’s three children, born in the 80s and 90s, received a religious education and are, according to their mother, “very religious.”

Within each family, these different attitudes vis-à-vis the state seem unproblematic since there is an underlying and more fundamental center of agreement. Moreover, both generations share ethics of self-limitation, rejecting luxury consumption and stressing community values, especially articulating a critique of today’s capitalistic economic order.

The Heinrichs: “There is no God”

This family’s grandmother was born in 1923 and originates from a Catholic mining family in the Sudetenland region. After enrolling in a commerce school, she began work as a clerk in a labor office. Following the Soviet occupation at the end of the Second World War, she and her family were expelled by the Czech authorities, and settled down near a Saxon mining area. She met her husband, who had been displaced from the East, now part of the new Polish state, at a village dance. He, however, soon moved to live with his relatives in Mecklenburg, where, in the context of the land reform, he was given a plot close to his parents’ house. She followed him there where they celebrated a Catholic wedding against the will of her spouse’s Protestant family. Given the predominantly Protestant culture surrounding her, this became a way of asserting her identity. While this may suggest that membership in the Catholic Church would be a key fact in the family’s future life, things in fact turned out otherwise.

The grandmother had a menial job in the local agricultural cooperative until a working accident forced her to look for a different job. Following a retraining course, she began working as an accountant for the cooperative. After a severe illness in the 1970s, however, she retired at the age of 45. The grandmother described these events from the perspective of someone who had endured a great deal in a passive way, subject to the whim of circumstance. During her illness, she resigned from the church together with her husband. “We came to understand,” she explained, “that God doesn’t help.” While she connects this statement to her own experiences of suffering, she also recalls that members of her family had devastating accidents immediately after the
Sunday service although the entire family, herself included, had lived a pious life. How can you believe in a God who lets his children suffer? “And then I said there’s no God.” The Catholic motto that “God afflicts those he loves” is thus turned into its opposite: “If I want to do good to my children I don’t afflict them with disease!” Unlike the Müllers, such New Testament precepts and religion as a whole have lost their plausibility for grandmother Heinrich. After her recovery, she and her husband left the church – and thus the religious field as a whole.

The way that she educated her two children, however, shows that her religious convictions had waned at a much earlier date. Although they did in fact receive religious instruction from a Catholic nun in the 1960s, the Jugendweihe issue served to reveal a tenuous connection to the church, as the family seemed to accept both the Jugendweihe and the church confirmation. In contrast to the preceding cases, the grandmother did not reject the governmental ritual, and, in doing so, distanced herself from the church’s official position. This led to a conflict with the Catholic nun, who reminded the family that the rituals were mutually exclusive, declaring the Jugendweihe to be a sin. Interestingly, it was not the grandmother but her young daughter who would argue with the nun, responding that: “When God invented the sins, there was no Jugendweihe yet.” She thus rejected and ridiculed the church’s demands on her. Moreover, she seems to have used an argument derived from outside of the family. Forced to choose between the two rituals by the nun, the daughter decided against the church. The education of the children thus turned into an arena for conflicts with the church to be carried out. In contrast with the other two families, grandmother Heinrich did not maintain her family’s Catholic tradition, and the next generation abandoned religion in favor of the new ideology: Unlike the other two cases, the family experienced an explicit shift of ideological hegemony. The mother left the church during her tertiary education at the end of the 1960s, and unlike the grandmother even joined the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED). Just like her husband, she recognized the political system positively: “I grew up like this. I grew up with this state and I supported it.” Her children, born in the 1970s, were raised in an atheist fashion, without any contact to the church.

The family history clearly reflects the conflicts between church and state. Unlike the other families, however, the Heinrich family opted in favor of the state. It was primarily the middle generation that seized the opportunities for upward mobility provided by the state and that was
willing to prove its loyalty in return. The father even started working for the GDR State Security. When he was about to sign his contract, his superior gave him a letter that declared his resignation from the church. And of course, he signed. As he explained:

Well, this is a secret service. I mean if you work for the socialist state, you can’t be in a church. It just didn’t mesh ideologically … Because all employees had to be members of the SED. Everyone knew that.

The father accepted the state’s demands for the ideological commitment of its citizens. It is at precisely this point that the state and religion enter into conflict as emerge as competing ideological communities.

The son, who participated in the interview, was born in 1979. He shared his parents’ atheist worldview and their criticism of contemporary capitalism. With plans to work in the German foreign service, he also inherited his father’s state-centered career orientation. He saw his father’s job as having been just another variety of public sector employment, as can be found in any other political system as well.

In terms of beliefs, the Heinrichs are clearly distinct from the other families. There are, however, similarities at the level of the family habitus in that all support an ethical system, according to which one has to stand up for his or her beliefs even at the price of personal disadvantage. In the case of the Heinrichs, these convictions were epitomized in the father’s career, which changing social circumstances, spawned by the post-socialist transitions, have stigmatized. In the interview, they criticize all those who fashion their convictions according to the system’s ideological parameters. This also refers to the post-socialist parvenus who were quick to abandon their socialist viewpoints for the sake of climbing the social ladder in the new system, thereby trading their morals for opportunities. From their own viewpoint, the Heinrichs continue to support their former ideals. While the Müllers view personal adversity as the work of God, for the Heinrichs they originate from the logic of the system. In the end, however, both of these families viewed their lives as being determined by higher authorities more than the Kuntzigs.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this article is to illustrate how Bourdieu’s theory can be employed to explain the effects of religious conflicts at the subjective level. Moreover, I have demonstrated how these conflicts were
reproduced and transformed through subjective appropriation and how resilient subjectivities reconfigured the pre-manufactured understandings offered by the state and the church. I have drawn on three family histories to highlight typical familial pathways in the context of their position within the religious field and their stances towards conflicts between the church and the state in the GDR. While the Müllers largely preserved the worldview inherited from the grandparent generation, the Kuntzigs would go through transformations articulated through the interconfessional marriage in the middle generation and their increased emphasis on political resistance. The Heinrichs, by contrast, completely broke with the Catholic Church to embrace atheism, entailing an explicit identification with the socialist state in the middle generation.

While all of the families were influenced by conflicts between the state and the church and were forced to take sides, they would embark on pathways that differed significantly. The different ways of responding to the state’s attacks against inherited worldviews and practices are most strongly articulated in the families’ stances towards the Jugendweihe ceremony. For the Müllers, the governmental propagation of Jugendweihe only led to a reaffirmation of their religious convictions. The Kuntzigs strove for an uncompromising approach towards issues of public ideological avowal while indicating their willingness to positively engage with the system at other levels. In the case of the Heinrichs, the new ideology and acceptance of the Jugendweihe ceremony eventually prevail over Catholic Church politics, leading to a worldview shift from the older to the middle generation. In the end, the Heinrichs can therefore be seen as the carriers of the new symbolic order.

Different positions and pathways may, however, correspond positively with similar dispositions at the level of the family habitus. This becomes visible when examining the moral distinctions that the families draw. Both the Müllers and the Heinrichs denigrate the “defectors,” supporting—in the domain of faith—an ethics of conviction instead. Their criticism against “the others” articulates their underlying resentment. By contrast, the Kuntzigs distinguish between more narrowly conceived issues of faith on the one hand, and practical questions on the other. In this sense, they support an ethics of responsibility to which this kind of resentment remains alien. This similarity is precipitated by their common social position, which strongly influences the familial habitus, as Bourdieu (1982) points out. This habitus serves less
to determine what people believe than to suggest certain ways in and through which beliefs are translated into everyday life practices. Whether families uphold or break with religious traditions is instead determined by concrete social circumstances such as the possibility of interconfessional marriage or the existence of a local Catholic community.

These positions entail different consequences for the structuring of the religious field: Pathways such as those illustrated by the Heinrichs weakened the position of the Catholic Church both within the religious field as well as with regard to confrontations with the state. The positions of the Müllers and the Kuntzigs appear to have confirmed and strengthened the church. In these cases, the concerns of religious experts and laity were similar, if not identical.

I have argued that the different ways in which families draw boundaries and take positions reflect the major conflicts within the religious field on the one hand, and the conflicts between the religious and the political fields on the other. In this sense, they give us an impression of what was at stake in the conflict over the symbolic foundations of the GDR, and of the kinds of social groups that were involved in the struggle. The analysis illustrates that the cutting of religious affiliation is neither the result of political repression nor of strategic conformism alone. The success of the governmental critique of religion indeed depends on its attaining subjective plausibility and thus becomes part of the people’s personal convictions, as the case of the Heinrichs suggests. In the other families, on the contrary, the state failed with its project of religious alienation, renunciation of church membership, and conversion to atheism. The Müllers and Kuntzigs instead rejected the demands made in the name of the official GDR symbolic order. The findings of this study strongly indicate that this symbolic foundation was not only shaped by the state but by the people as well. The interaction between the state and non-state actors such as families gave rise to a symbolic order that differed from what the SED envisioned in its plans to replace religious actors and institutions as part of its struggle for ideological hegemony.

References


THREE CATHOLIC CASE STUDIES


106  CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

BETWEEN MENSCHLICHKEIT AND MISSIONSBFEHL: GOD, WORK, AND THE WORLD AMONG CHRISTIANS IN SAXONY

Esther Peperkamp

A tablet bearing the inscription Bete und Arbeite ("Pray and work," from the year 1881) can be seen until today on one of the facades in Dresden. Another inscription in a small village near Dresden reads ohne Fleiss kein Preis ("No cross, no crown"). On a building in Halle one can read ohne Gott's Gunst ist alle Bau'n Umsunst ("Building is fruitless without God’s favor"). These inscriptions bear witness to the complex of religious-moral values that has shaped the regions of today’s German states of Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt. This complex also found its reflection in practices such as devotionals or prayer services (An-dachten) for employees in companies with Christian owners.

Although one can see graffiti on the walls of today’s Saxony shouting “Jesus!” at passers by, and biblical texts appearing at railway stations, these public manifestations of religion are fundamentally different from the ones referred to above. They are an expression of the evangelical vigor of a religious minority, whereas the former bear testimony to a socio-cultural complex that pervaded the whole of society. The weakening of this moral-religious complex can already be observed at the beginning of the 20th century. Common devotionals in the Kuebler & Niethammer paper-production company, for example, were discontinued in 1918. It has indeed been argued that secularization had started well before the anti-religious politics of the GDR (cf. Pollack & Pickel 2000). Between 1861 and 1913, for example, church attendance for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony, the region’s main Protestant church, decreased from 72 to 35% (Nowak 1996, 25). The decline of

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1 Presentation by Swen Steinberg at the 2008 conference entitled "Mehrwert, Märkte, und Moral" in Chemnitz.

2 One must be careful, however, since statistics such as these often give a false impression. The increase in church funerals in Leipzig at the end of the 19th century is more the effect of new funeral rules than any indicator for an increasing role of religion (Nowak 1996, 28–9).
religious affiliation as well as practice in the GDR, however, remained remarkable, in particular when compared to surrounding countries.

The process of secularization in the GDR can be described using Casanova’s (1994) distinction of three different definitions or aspects of secularization: secularization as a differentiation, the decline of religious practices, and privatization. The first concept points to the emancipation of various spheres of society – the state, capitalist market society, and modern science – from the religious sphere. The second dimension involves the decline of religious affiliation and practice. Privatization furthermore denotes the retreat of religion from the public sphere into private life. These developments can also be recognized as having taken place in the GDR, but in a distinctive manner. People were explicitly encouraged to cancel their church membership, resulting in a steep decline in religious practice. Alternative world views, particularly with regard to science (see Thomas Schmidt-Lux’s contribution to this volume), were propagated and set against religion (differentiation). Furthermore, religion was pushed back into the private sphere in the GDR; as soon as it publicly manifested itself, it became political. As a result of these developments, affiliated and practicing Christians would soon become a minority.

The secularization in the GDR along these lines evokes the question of its relationship with the repressive politics of the socialist state. However, repression alone must be deemed insufficient as an explanation. Wohlrab-Sahr (2008) therefore introduces the idea of the subjective plausibility of the dichotomy between politics (and science), and religion as a refinement of the idea of repression. This plausibility not only led people to leave the church, but also created a secular habitus, or, as Wohlrab-Sahr puts it, “secular minds” (2008, 131). The introduction of this subjective dimension demands a different approach than do usual surveys. Indeed, it may not at all be very fruitful to focus on numbers. There is a distinction to be made between the mere existence of religious beliefs and sentiments among individuals and the influence of religion as a whole. Investigating the first does not necessarily elucidate the latter. In other words, counting how often certain beliefs and practices are attested in a given population does not necessarily help us to understand the waxing or waning of the influence of religion on private lives (see also van Rooden 2004). Social historians have placed a focus on the private lives of ordinary people out of dissatisfaction with existing secularization theories and their inability to explain certain fundamental changes in society. These studies have led to
interesting new insights (Brown 2001), which have stimulated further research along these lines (including studies on the sudden religious decline in the Netherlands in the 1960s, as elaborated in van Rooden 2004).

The argument to look at personal histories also comes from another corner. Over the past few decades, interest has grown in investigating individual personal histories and everyday lives, with regard to GDR history in particular. Lüdtke, the main proponent of the ‘history of everyday life,’ argues that

[b]y explaining social history in its experiential or subjective dimensions (…) conventional distinctions between the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ might be transcended; a more effective way of making the elusive connections between the cultural and political realms may be found (Lüdtke 1995: viii).

Such an approach seems particularly useful for the analysis of religion in the GDR and beyond, since the concept of secularization hinges to a large extent on the distinction between private and public. Too often, the process of religious change has been understood in terms of repression, turning East Germans into victims of the regime. When looking at people’s individual experiences, this picture can indeed become more complex, as it can be shown “how people are both objects and subjects of history” (Lüdtke 1995, 6). A more diverse image appears when looking at the choices people make in local social contexts. Only by contextualizing individual choices can one gain insight into how religious meaning is produced, reproduced, contested, discontinued, and disrupted. This article addresses precisely this task by looking at how Christians from various denominations narrate their experiences in education and their professional lives in the GDR, and how they position themselves in relation to religion in their narratives.³

It is no coincidence that I began with references to the sphere of labor. It is precisely this sphere that has been most influenced by the GDR state bureaucracy. As professing Christians, my interviewees were faced with disadvantages and drawbacks in education and their professional lives, influencing their careers both before and after unification. Interviews were therefore conducted with a focus on religion

³ The article is based upon research data that were collected as part of the research project “Religion and Morality” at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle (Germany). Funding was provided by the Max Planck Institute.
and career (the latter in particular in relation to their current self-employment). I established contact with them through Christian business organizations, which came to eastern Germany following unification in order to provide moral and practical support for eastern German Christians.

The social background of the interviewees was, however, quite diverse. While some had a working class background, only very few belonged to the intelligentsia. A couple of the interviewees had fathers or brothers who were pastors, preachers, or priests. The majority was raised Christian, although a couple of the interviewees came from atheist families and even had family members in the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED). They were mostly trained for technical or skilled work, with some remaining in their former professions as carpenters or measurement technicians, while others have instead gone into advertising, office equipment, financial consultancy, real estate, environmental consultancy, or have opened their own shops.

The political changes after the Wende (changes of 1989–1990) and reunification with West Germany strongly affected the lives of my interviewees. While some could finally realize their dream of becoming self-employed, others did so out of necessity, as their jobs were about to become redundant. The political changes were usually seen as an exciting time, providing many new opportunities, while religion was no longer a drawback and questions were no longer asked about one's worldview. This raises the question of how the private and public dimensions of religion are experienced today, and to what extent life experience in the GDR remains relevant in understanding articulations of God, work, and the world.

**Confrontations and compromises**

The majority of the interviewees was born in the 1950s and 1960s and grew up in a time when the decline of religious affiliation and religious practice was already well underway. They were well aware of their minority status, in particular through their experience at school.

In the GDR children would at first attend polytechnic school until the 10th grade. The polytechnic school was introduced in 1959 to

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4 In this light, it is interesting to note that a positive correlation has been found between being a member of the Protestant church and becoming self-employed both in the GDR and after unification (Lechner and Pfeifer 1993).
replace conventional elementary schools. Over the years, some small adjustments were made to the educational structure, but the basic structure remained the same (Hahn 1998). After finishing polytechnic school, a choice had to be made for vocational school or a type of “extended high school” (Erweiterte Oberschule or EOS). The university entry qualification (Abitur, involving the final school examination) could only be obtained after the EOS or after an alternative, “third” educational path known as vocational training with Abitur (Berufsausbildung mit Abitur).

For Christians, school and the school-related mass organizations were a potential source of conflict. The relationship between school and church was a tense one in the GDR. After doing away with religious teaching in schools, the socialist state developed its own initiation ritual (Jugendweihe), which was designed as an alternative to confirmation. A certain political commitment was also generally demanded of teachers as well, causing GDR teachers to be notoriously hostile to religion (Thériault 2007). The children’s Pioneer organization (Pioniere), the Freie Deutsche Jugend (FDJ) youth organization, the secular Jugendweihe ceremony, and (for men) military service constituted key moments in the GDR at which the state demanded a pledge of loyalty. Although a total rejection of the Pioneers, FDJ, Jugendweihe, and the Army was quite rare, a rejection of only one of these already resulted in considerable pressure and could affect one’s schooling and professional career negatively. Christians were often not even admitted into the EOS. They could of course petition for admittance, but it seems that they more often chose an alternative instead, for example, simply giving up any ambitions for higher education and go into vocational training instead. Another option was to do vocational training together with the Abitur diploma. Evening classes were indeed more accessible.

In case of the Pioneers, it was the parents who usually decided for their children not to take part. Hans, for example, was born in a small town in Saxony in the late fifties as the youngest of nine children.\(^5\) His family belonged to the Landeskirchliche Gemeinschaft, a particular community within the Protestant church. The pietistic movement was originally founded in Augsburg by the factory-owner Ernest Mehl; the association of communities of the Landeskirchliche Gemeinschaft in Saxony (Landesverband Landeskirchlicher Gemeinschaften)

\(^5\) Hans is a pseudonym, like all other names of interviewees in this paper.
was founded in Chemnitz in 1899. This community acknowledges the structures and practices of the Protestant church, but also has its own preachers as well. Hans’ father was in fact such a preacher. His parents did not allow him to join the Pioneers, which he regretted, because it turned him into an outsider. Although he said that this feeling lasted only for a short while and that he was in fact accepted by his classmates, later in the interview he again stressed the feeling of being an outsider several times (using phrases such as “and again, I was the only one…”). The feeling of having been an outsider recurred in many interviews.

The decision not to take part in the FDJ was usually made by my interviewees themselves. Horst, who had been raised within a family that belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony, said, for example:

I understood, perhaps also because of my family, that it’s not a good thing to go with the flow, and I decided at early age, when I was 12 or 13 years old, to be a Christian. Here in the East that meant no Jugendweihe and no FDJ. Probably 1% or less of the population wasn’t part of the FDJ. The consequence was that I couldn’t go to university. And because of that higher education was denied to me.

The narrative of not joining youth organizations or taking part in the Jugendweihe was strikingly similar in a large majority of the interviews. Well aware of the consequences of their decisions, they accepted the fact that certain professional careers would be practically off-limits to them.

Despite the different institutional positions of the Protestant and Catholic churches (Thériault 2004), their experiences did not seem to differ much. Manfred, born into a Catholic family in 1966, explicitly places himself in an oppositional narrative:

You always had the feeling that you were dissenting… you always felt like the opposition. We didn’t take part in any of the state activities, we categorically rejected them. I can say that about my family, where I grew up. We didn’t take part in the Pioneers, we weren’t in the FDJ, we didn’t participate in the Jugendweihe, and we saw our activities as being in the Church.

The usual consequence of students rejecting participation in these mass organizations and rituals was that they could not take their final school examination (Abitur), although many interviewees stressed that they had in fact been excellent pupils.
Not only was access to higher education denied to many of my interviewees, but vocational training also often constituted a problem. Hans, for instance, was not only not allowed to do his *Abitur*, he was also denied entry to various vocational fields:

...then I wanted to do my *Abitur*, which was denied to me (...) it was impossible. Then I wanted to do vocational education with an *Abitur* diploma. But this was also not approved. Then I applied for an apprenticeship to be a technician in measurement technology. That was also refused to me. Then I received an offer to become a construction worker. That was already at a lower level. I must add to all this that I finished the tenth grade with distinction. And all those who had worse grades got better apprenticeship positions. I was really not very far removed from becoming a road sweeper, at least that's how I felt. And that really was unpleasant.

In the end, Hans entered into an apprenticeship as an electrician. Others, such as Manfred already began to work toward learning a trade in their early school years:

When one didn't take part in these things, the *Jugendweihe* in particular, the chances were really slim [to obtain access to higher education]. And then I would have to spend three years in the army, something that I also could not imagine doing. And that's why I decided to work toward learning a trade, even as a child.

Their positioning as a Christian (visible through the decision not to take part in the common youth organizations) had a lasting effect on the professional career. It caused Christians to end up more often in skilled trades.

Although a large part of the East German economy was state-controlled, there were areas where such state control was felt less directly. The largest part of the economy consisted of state-owned VEB companies (*Volkseigener Betrieb*, i.e. People's company). Aside from VEBs, there were PG companies, i.e. production cooperatives, in which skilled tradespeople came together, but which were controlled by the state and subject to state objectives (and were combined into PGHs – production cooperatives for skilled trades). Private business was severely limited, and was found mainly among skilled workers and retailers. Private businesses faced serious limits, for example, when it came to the number of employees they could hire, or the taxes they had to pay (see Pickel 1992). There were, moreover, VOB companies, who were controlled by the parties allowed to exist alongside the ruling
SED, such as the Christian Democrats (CDU). These companies indeed provided an alternative, and Manfred, for example, entered into an apprenticeship in bindery in a VOB:

I did my apprenticeship in a CSU company (sic! – Manfred means CDU). That is to say: they were not so red. They had to do what the SED said, but it was a VOB, and they didn’t take it so seriously over there.

He continued to explain:

You had the SED and two or three others. And one of them was a Christian party. And they were in control of VOB companies… They weren’t party companies to that degree. And one could often find a Christian mindset there, because many of those who worked in such companies – not everybody, but a large part – were Christians.

Being a self-employed skilled worker (Handwerker) allowed one to occupy a niche in which politics were, relatively speaking, absent. The GDR has been called a niche society (Nischengesellschaft is a term that comes from Gauss (1983)), and some interviewees explicitly used this term themselves. One of these niches was in fact the church itself. Rainer for example, born in 1952 into a Lutheran family as the third of four children, was active in the music scene. Knowing that his career possibilities were limited, he was “looking for a niche in which I could engage myself.” This niche indeed turned out to be the church band. Another niche was work with the crafts, i.e. Handwerk. It is therefore not surprising that many interviewees had thought about becoming self-employed already before the Wende. Their motivations were of two kinds: for some, the idea of being self-employed developed out of a hunger for freedom as such – to be one’s own boss and make one’s own decisions – for others, being self-employed meant being more or less sheltered from the state. As Horst saw it:

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6 The fact that many Christians learned skilled trades, also led to an overrepresentation of tradespeople in the CDU in the GDR. As Wolfgang, owner of a small family electromechanics business just outside of Dresden remarked: “all the tradespeople in the area were CDU members, with one or two exceptions. If you became a tradesperson, you almost automatically became a member of the local CDU.” However, in general, I found an attitude of political abstinence. The CDU’s cooperation with the SED partly explains why this was the case.

7 Despite the fact that it was heavily regulated by the state. High taxes and the virtual impossibility of turning a profit were among the results of these regulations (Pilleul-Arp 2005). Another interviewee mentioned that apprenticeships were assigned by the state. Companies could not therefore educate whomever they wanted whenever they wanted.
I found an escape in the occupation of a craftsman. I was a radio and television technician. I decided to do this because access to higher education was denied to me, and because one was left alone politically in such trades.

Also Hans related his decision to get into *Handwerk* in this way:

> It would have been a small step into freedom for us at the time. Being self-employed in the GDR era meant having a certain freedom from the state.\(^8\)

Others managed to maintain a distance to politics and ideology in their careers despite pressure to declare themselves. Maria was born in 1957, and described herself as having come from a decent Catholic family “with regular church attendance, active participation in the Catholic youth organization, and my husband is Catholic as well.” She continued that from there on it was “really normal: married, children baptized, first communion, confirmation.” She shrugged her shoulders at the fact that her oldest daughter had married a non-Christian with the words “oh well.” Her family was a typical worker family. Her father worked as a lathe operator who went to night school for additional training, and her mother as seamstress. Maria herself had begun as an engineer, but now owns a catering company (catering largely for school and the public sector).

When the question of party membership came up when I was a student, I steadfastly stood up for my Christian worldview and refused to join. I was to begin an assistant’s track (*Assistentenlaufbahn*) at the director level, but that was tied to the party (…) And I said: “No. Children and youth organizations are okay, but when one is adult, and should stand up for one’s worldview…” I cannot go to Church on Sunday with my prayer-book and then to the party meeting on Monday with the party book. I cannot be a Christian and an atheist in one person. That’s when I said: “No, I don’t do that.” And then I started a normal job.

Maria’s aversion to political involvement extended to the Christian party as well. When she was asked to work for the *Handwerkskammer* (Chamber of Trade), the question came up again. The Chamber of

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\(^8\) Strikingly, Hans is more positive about the GDR period than about today’s world when it comes to having a Christian public identity: “I think that as a Christian, things weren’t necessarily so bad. One had to be prepared not to be able to learn certain vocations and that not everyone could get an education, but below the line one was accepted and *not* discriminated against. And partially received more respect than now in the public sphere [original emphasis].” Unfortunately, Hans couldn’t think of an example for this observation.
Trade was composed of all permitted parties in the GDR: the SED, but also the other permitted parties, including the CDU. In the job interview she announced that she would like to get the job “but without being tied to a party – any party.”

**Self-representations**

My interviewees have without doubt experienced repression when it came to education and their professional lives. Nevertheless, in their narration, their experiences are far more nuanced than the simple reference to repression would suggest. The interviewees did not speak in terms of resistance and compliance but instead represented themselves as having been neither victims nor collaborators. A very clear example of this is Maria. The way Maria presented herself in her life story showed very well how – in her opinion – she had dealt constructively with the limitations she faced as a Christian. She had first wanted to become a teacher, but her parents advised against it as the profession (much aspired to by Christians in the GDR, Wappler 2007) involved a clear ideological commitment, and it would have been extremely difficult to be accepted into a teaching program. Maria nevertheless stressed that becoming a teacher might have been possible, if *only she had really wanted it*. She thus clearly felt that her decision was not necessarily dictated by the particular circumstances, but that she herself had made the final decision.

Thomas, another Catholic, at first seemed to justify an attitude of compromise with the words “when you are in a cage together with a lion, you shouldn’t pull his tail.” He also emphasized that things weren't quite so bad in the GDR. Interestingly, however, he also decided against his own *Jugendweihe*, maintaining, however, that he did not go on to experience any problems. It then, however, suddenly crossed his mind that he did not take his final school examination, but he waved that aside as well, saying “okay, I did have a problem in that I couldn’t take my final school examination, but then I did my vocational training with an *Abitur*.” Thomas did in fact take part in the FDJ, but often skipped meetings that did not appeal to him. According to him, his being Catholic was met with acceptance in school.

Other Christians had similar experiences of simultaneously being both inside and outside the mainstream, but as a matter of their own initiative. Adam, who was raised in the main regional Protestant church, but has shifted more and more to the *Landeskirchliche*
Gemeinschaft, for example was never a member of FDJ, but did take part in all the FDJ activities:

I could decide myself if I wanted to take part in the FDJ and the Thälmann-Pioniere, but it was my own decision not to. But, since I’m quite an active person, in spite of not being a member, I did contribute to the FDJ meetings. When there were special meetings, I wore a blue shirt, so that I didn’t stand out and that was a sign for the teachers that I wasn’t part of it, but I didn’t want to be against it either.

He continued:

On the one hand it was schizophrenic to isolate yourself, but in some way I also let them know that they were important to me as people: “The organization is shit, but you are okay as people, and I get involved because it makes sense. I can only change things when I’m part of it.”

Stephan, who had moved towards a more charismatic form of Protestantism in the GDR era and is now professionally active in real estate, was not only part of FDJ (in his own words, he did not have the “courage to reject membership”), but even became a FDJ secretary because there was nobody else who wanted to take the position. The teacher who was responsible for the FDJ turned out to be sympathetic towards the church, and they “mixed everything a little bit.” The contact with his teacher turned out to be helpful for his professional career:

The teacher said that it would be difficult to be a [university] student, because I am a Christian. “But I will write that you are active in the FDJ,” And we managed it that way, so that I came along further and further.

Also Adam experienced the goodwill of his teachers:

We were relatively good pupils, we were also constructive. And at some point the teachers acknowledged this and said “let’s forget about the mass organizations.” My teacher would have tried to get me into the EOS. The EOS was a kind of gymnasium [academically oriented high school] in the GDR. One could only go there if one was politically involved. It wasn’t enough to be good at school… But my teacher had so much faith in me that she said: I will get you there. But I didn’t want to go to EOS and do the Abitur.

While religion and socialist education were not officially compatible, and teachers were hostile to religion as a rule (Thériault 2007), the situation was much more nuanced in practice. Much depended not only on the individual involved, but also on the people in his or her direct environment. Wappler (2007), for example, describes how in certain regions Christians were able to continue to exercise considerable influence on schooling and the educational system. Furthermore,
Wappler found that there were also many non-Christian teachers who lent their support to disadvantaged Christian pupils. This observation has been confirmed in various interviews.

Both Adam and Stephan had the fortunate opportunity of meeting teachers of goodwill. They both could have taken their Abitur exams, but Adam’s aspirations lay elsewhere, and Stephan was not a very good pupil, although he would in fact return to school later in life. He even went on to university to write a dissertation, made possible by one of his professors, who, interestingly, was a party secretary. Again, it was his personal contacts that would help him to reach his goal. “He was red, redder than red, but a very honest person,” he commented. Other interviewees also told that the best contacts they had with non-Christians in the GDR were often with dedicated communists.

That the divide between Christians and socialists was not seen in terms of black and white is also exemplified by Rainer. His parents were self-employed until 1972, when the state took over their company. Rainer himself opted for a vocational education in mechanical engineering with an Abitur, and recalls how his decision not to participate in the Jugendweihe caused his mother problems.

Because I decided not to do the Jugendweihe, she was removed from the parents council. She had been visited at home by the director, who – curiously enough – was a party member of the CDU.

Rainer added that the CDU in the GDR cannot be compared to CDU as it exists today, with which he justified his decision to join the party at the time of the Wende, the party that – he remarked ironically – had thrown his mother out of the parents council. In his perception, however, a lot depends on personalities in connection with the times in which one lives. Had the Wende taken place at a different point in time, he might have joined the Social Democratic Party (SPD) instead. Rainer is thus well aware of the fact that local and historical contingencies are of key importance in understanding the choices that people make. These contingencies also influence how they position themselves in the world in their narratives, for example in their contemporary professional life.

**Between Menschlichkeit and Missionbefehl**

When it came to her personal convictions, Maria exhibited a rather strict distinction between the public and private spheres. She saw religion as something to be done in private. The public dimension of her
religious conviction can be summarized in the concept of humanity (Menschlichkeit). Speaking about her work, she said:

My employees know that I’m a Catholic. And I try to make it clear that I’m a self-confessed Catholic. Because believing is one thing, but to live one’s faith and to implement Menschlichkeit is quite a big thing for me. And my employees have told me that they have noticed that I treat them differently [than other employers who do not belong to church] and that I also take human issues into consideration, no matter what the situation. And they think maybe it’s because I go to church [laughs]. Because there are many atheists and they often ask me … is that because you go to church? And I say ‘maybe’, I just leave it as an open question. I don’t know if it has something to do with my personality.

Humane, or menschlich, was a word that often recurred in the interviews, especially in my interviews with Catholics. For Maria Menschlichkeit meant listening to the problems of her employees. She had, for example, once taken home a female employee when the woman was temporarily homeless. She also hired people who would have difficulties to find a job elsewhere. She thought it important “to assert humanity” and to “consider human issues, regardless of the situation.” Manfred also explicitly referred to the concept of being menschlich.

We have a company and we are responsible for 40 people. We more or less know the way they are, and we can exert our influence. When somebody is in trouble then we support him and when somebody else…. I say, in principle, [we try to be] humane. (My emphasis)

In relation to the employees, it was often emphasized that a Christian company is just like any other company, although it may have a more social face. Thomas, for example, stated that, in his opinion, a good entrepreneur “upholds humane standards.”

It could be argued, on the one hand, that the emphasis on Menschlichkeit is the result of a socialization involving particular values in the GDR, such as justice and equality. These values are often emphasized in contrast to the harsh market society. The interviewees compared themselves with the perceived ruthlessly competitive society of West Germany, a contrast that forms a strong component of their identities as East Germans. The origin of this could, however, also be sought in their individual experiences and biographies. Many interviewees had experienced in the GDR that the line between good and bad could not be drawn along ideological lines. They had had experiences of meeting the “right people,” who, in spite of their strong political stance, had supported them and shown them goodwill. Of course, the emphasis on the human factor was also present in official church
policy as well. The Catholic Church emphasized the need to live together in a constructive way (see Karstein in this volume). However, Maria and Manfred in particular were very critical towards the Church. Their emphasis on Menschlichkeit should therefore instead be read at a discursive as well as an experiential level.

A similar pattern can be observed among Protestant interviewees, who for the most part came from strict religious communities (pietistic or charismatic). What makes these communities particularly interesting is that they explicitly demand from their members that they publicly proclaim their faith (Missionsbefehl), placing in question any strict division between public and private. Hans, who was raised in a community of the Landeskirchliche Gemeinschaft centered on one’s personal decision for Jesus, commented:

> If I’m convinced that I can only save my life when I get to know God through Jesus, if I believe this, and if I’m convinced that those who don’t will not be saved, then I’m responsible for doing something to make them believe. It’s like somebody falling down and I try to catch him. I do that automatically. And if I’m convinced that belief will give me eternal life in heaven, wherever that may be, then I’m obliged… If I don’t do it, it will be my fault. But the question is always how.

This question of how, dealt with in an extremely delicate manner, is indeed of interest and sheds light on the relationship with 'the world'. The contrast between the way these Protestants harmoniously related to others in their narratives, and the conflicting way in which they related to state institutions is striking. The way they related to non-believers in their professional life (employees and customers) was heavily influenced by their convictions of the personal integrity of others. It is true that in some cases, the proprietor organized prayer sessions, confronting their non-religious employees in this way with their conviction, but these were actually quite rare (and the person most active in organizing such meetings happened to be a West German lawyer). Even if employees with a religious background were sometimes hired, they almost never constituted a majority. My interviewees also said that they were very careful with their customers. They would only start to speak about their religion “when the situation allowed for it,” and often in a coded way. As Hans said:

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9 This makes Christian meetings featuring western German speakers awkward: they exhibit an almost American approach to evangelization, whereas eastern Germans are much more careful in this regard.
I try it by subtle means when sending New Year’s and Christmas wishes, slightly codified. I always have my standard text like “Blessed Christmas and for the upcoming year I wish you – I think out something new every year – from Hans and his fellow creatures.” The word “fellow creatures” (Mitgeschöpf) points to my belief, so does the word “blessed.” This is usually well received. First, it is somewhat different from the usual cards, and it is codified. For the alert reader it is obvious that I have something to do with faith. It’s always a question of finding the right balance.

The attitude of these Protestants seems to be described best as “being there and seizing the opportunity.” A certain biographical continuity can be observed in this regard. Adam, for example, wasn’t sure if he would be able to work in the advertisement industry, thereby glorifying products instead of God. After consulting with Christians from West Germany, however, he came to the conclusion he could in fact work in the field. Besides, he argued, Christians should be everywhere, and not shun certain areas of activity. He considered this to be a constant throughout his life: while he was not a member of the FDJ in school, he still attended FDJ meetings, justifying this in the interview in that one can only change things if one is involved. He is supported by Stephan, who works in real estate, and now, after many moves, is a member of a small independent church.

You should have atheist friends because otherwise you cannot convince people of Jesus. How could you do that if you didn’t have atheistic friends? … Christians have to be among the atheists.

Hans added that he did not want to win people over nor did he wish to annoy them. Stephan also emphasized the importance of this attitude in contemporary society.

You have to be loyal, behave with integrity, be true. And to leave people as they are because it makes no sense to change them. That doesn’t work. It is God’s responsibility to have them become interested in belief. Although it may be my wish … But I cannot show it openly, because then I would be trying to cast a net, and others do not take that well.

In the past he had taken part in street evangelization, but has since given it up “because it is so embarrassing.” Not only did the interviewees thus refuse to position themselves as Christians, they also
refused to judge others on the basis of their beliefs or lack thereof. Even those who felt an obligation to speak to others about their faith regarded other people’s worldviews as their own personal affairs. The personal integrity of themselves and others took precedence over anything else.

**Integrity and authority**

Stephan, by referring to integrity, seems to have captured well the general sensitivity among eastern German Christians of various denominations. This type of personal integrity was stressed in accounts of their (professional) experiences both in the GDR and today. Maria, for example, had rejected party membership because she did not think she could be both a Christian and an atheist. Hans, when asked about how religion influenced his work, stated that he could not “live in two worlds.”

This honesty towards oneself also led to a critical stance towards the church and religious authority. Among my Protestant interviewees, it was quite common to move from church community to church community, to make use of the offers of several churches, or even to say that their belief is a mixture of various elements (including Catholic ones). Rainer describes himself as a convinced Christian with some “rough edges” and his “own opinions.” And Maria, a Catholic, had her own opinions in matters such as whether mothers should work and whether stores should be open on Sundays. In her own life, she went to church whenever it suited her, adapting church attendance to her irregular professional life. And Manfred, being very critical of the Catholic Church as institution, said that he was not in fact a staunch Catholic: “I’m a Christian, but not a Catholic.”

Statements such as these would seem to mesh with the idea of secularization as the decline of religious authority, which has been defined as the “declining influence of social structures whose legitimation rests on reference to the supernatural” (Chaves 1994: 756). People made their own choices, and they made them in accordance with religious
principles as they saw fit. Their emphasis on integrity is also one of sincerity, which, according to Keane leaves no room for outward sources of authority, hence their critical attitude towards the church. “The subject, to the extent it aspires to modernity […] seeks to act as the source of its own authority” (Keane 2002: 74). The concept of authority seems to be highly relevant when trying to understand religious change in modern society. In Van Rooeden’s study, interviewees spoke about the position of religion in their lives when they were young, that it was something forced upon them. The 1960s seem to be a particular period in which these authority structures changed for large parts of Western Europe. There are strong arguments in favor of focusing on authority when investigating processes of religious change (Chaves 1994). However, it should be noted that the decline of religious authority, on the other hand, does not result in more autonomy: individuals are still subject to various forms of authority. “The discourse and practices of the modern self are spread by, and rest upon, existing authorities like the welfare state, the labor market, and above all the world of consumption…” (Van Roooden 2004: 26). Indeed, when looking at the current emphasis on self-employment and self-reliance in eastern Germany in the context of high unemployment rates and a dependency on the state for social benefits, it becomes clear that new authoritative discourses and practices have entered the lives of eastern Germans. Consumerism has become another such sphere.

Such authoritative practices and discourses are best approached, as I have argued here, by looking at individual experiences and narratives rather than by bringing out broader narratives. I argue that such personal experiences have had a profound influence on people’s convictions and worldview, leading them to emphasize human factors and considerations instead of religious ones in their relationships with others. Integrity and sincerity should be understood in specific historical contexts instead of as the outcome of modernization and instead of disregarding them as signs of internal secularization. When it comes to defining religion and the secular, the examples that I presented here show that inherent vulnerabilities and repression are just one side of the story. To gain a fuller understanding of religious change – in whichever direction – one has to take into account the link between individual life stories and the contexts in which they develop.

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11 Summed up well in the German word Selbständigkeit.
References


RELIGIOUS SOCIALIZATION IN A SECULAR ENVIRONMENT: 
JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES IN EASTERN GERMANY

Małgorzata Rajtar

I have to heed one thing: that my children are important to me and the most important is what Jehovah says: that first of all in His house a child should learn the Truth, so above all I have to be here for my children. 
(Woman in her mid-forties, Saxony)

INTRODUCTION

This article addresses a vital problem for many religious movements: to increase their memberships and to retain their member’s children in the movement. I propose to analyze this issue in the rather unusual setting of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) which one of my interviewees, a Jehovah’s Witness in her mid-forties, born in Karl-Marx-Stadt (now again Chemnitz), Saxony characterized: “In our country, the GDR, there were almost no religious people; it was an atheist state; people were brought up that way.” These words of my interviewee, born in a family of Jehovah’s Witnesses, mother of nine children, are indeed true. Aside from the Czech Republic and Estonia, eastern Germany is considered to be the most secularized country in Europe (Pollack 2002; Pollack 2003). During the forty years of the socialist regime some religious groups, such as Christian Scientists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Pentecostals, were banned and their members were subject to surveillance and persecutions. Although ever since the country’s unification, the political situation of the Protestant and Catholic churches as well as smaller religious communities has changed, this has not, however, resulted in a general religious revival (Pollack 2000). In this respect, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who are the focus of this article, are to be considered exceptional. Taking into account the number of active Witnesses (“Publishers”) at the beginning and end of the GDR and the high scale of persecution, it is safe to say that the policy of the State Security (or Stasi) was not fulfilled. Witnesses were
considered “the largest single victim group of the SED dictatorship” (Besier and Vollnhals 2003, 5) managing to retain its membership numbers all throughout the GDR era. Since 1997, after years of expansion, the number of Witnesses has remained at the same level.

This religious movement is interesting for several reasons. First of all, along with the United States and Britain, Germany is one of the “traditional heartlands” of Jehovah’s Witnesses. In Germany, Jehovah’s Witnesses, initially known as *Ernste Bibelforscher* (Bible Students, until 1931), were active from 1903 when the first German branch office was established in Elberfeld, now part of the city of Wuppertal. The founder of the organization, Charles Taze Russell, visited Saxony (Dresden and Leipzig) as early as in 1891, during his first trip to Europe. He would later return to hold sermons in Germany between 1909 and 1911. On April 10, 1914, 13 Jehovah’s Witnesses took part in their annual Memorial of Christ in Chemnitz, 29 in Leipzig, and 103 in Dresden.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses are probably the best known new religious movement in Germany (Fincke and Twisselmann 2005, 534). The reason for this is not so much the number of active members but rather the public evangelizing that they practice. According to the Society’s own statistics in Saxony there are 13,262 publishers (01.2007). Chemnitz (known as Karl-Marx-Stadt from 1953–1990) and the surrounding *Chemnitzer Land*, where I conducted thirteen months of fieldwork between 2006 and 2007, is considered to have the highest density of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Germany (0.54%), and was one of the main centers of Witness in the GDR (Dennis 2006; Hacke 2000).

Although the number of Jehovah’s Witnesses in comparison to the Protestant and Catholic churches had been rather small, they were persecuted not only in the Third Reich, but also in the German Democratic Republic. The Jehovah’s Witnesses were banned in the GDR (August 1950), but received legal recognition as a religious organization from the state in March 1990, several months after the fall of the Berlin Wall. According to Hans-Hermann Dirksen (2006), a

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1 By comparison, the total population in Saxony was almost 4,300,000 in 2004, with Protestants accounting for 21.5 percent and Catholics 3.6 percent of the population (Statistisches Jahrbuch Sachsen 2005). There are roughly 163,000 in Germany as a whole.

2 The persecutions in the Third Reich go beyond the scope of this paper. According to Hacke (2000; cf. Besier and Vollnhals 2003; H.-H. Dirksen 2002), there were about 25,000 *Bibelforscher* in Germany in 1933, of which some 10,000 were persecuted by the Nazis.
German historian of law and specialist in the persecution of Witnesses in the former GDR, there were over 23,000 publishers in 1950 and over 21,000 in 1990. During the GDR era, abstaining from political or union activity, rejecting public referenda or elections, refusing to perform military service, and the “privileges” of missionary work and attending meetings where no mention of socialism was made attracted the particular attention of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands) and the State Security (Stasi). It is not possible to provide all the details of the Stasi’s operations against Witnesses. The story of persecutions has been told elsewhere (see, for instance, Besier and Vollnhals 2003; Dennis 2006; Dirksen 2006; Hacke 2000). These were aimed at Bible study groups, door-to-door evangelization, Witness courier and communication systems, but also at Jehovah’s Witnesses families (A. and H.-H. Dirksen 2002). Even if the Stasi’s policy of surveillance and “decomposition” of Jehovah’s Witnesses went amiss, it nonetheless had a strong influence on their practices there, especially the door-to-door visits so typical of the movement. According to movement’s own data, after the first wave of persecutions in the 1960s, only 25 percent of publishers proselytized regularly, a number that would in fact increase to 66 percent after the relaxation of persecution at the end of 1980s. Banned as a religious organization, not allowed to build and gather at congresses or in their Kingdom Halls, and restricted in their proselytizing activity, the Witnesses were forced to turn inwards toward their families and children. Andrew Holden’s (2002, 125) remark on the British Witnesses that “the effective socialisation of children is the Witnesses’ strategy for survival,” seems to describe the GDR era well. Of the 40 Witnesses I interviewed in my fieldwork, 19 (47%) were born into families of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Their life stories convey a highly homogenous picture of an upbringing in the ‘truth’ while, nonetheless, testifying to the educational policy of the socialist regime and its ideological goals. It has to be emphasized, however, that the importance of the family as a ‘socialization unit’ and the place where Witness children should gain knowledge about Jehovah and the ‘light of the truth’ has not changed even after Germany’s unification.

4 It has been stressed in scholarly literature on Jehovah’s Witnesses that the Society is quite successful in retaining members’ children (see, for example, Beckford 1975; Holden 2004; Penton 1985; Stark and Iannaccone 1997).
In the early days of April 2007, a couple of days after the annual Witness celebration of the Memorial of Jesus Christ’s Death, I had an appointment with a Jehovah’s Witness in her early forties, the mother of three children. Like many female Witnesses, she has not worked since giving birth to her first child. Although the woman is married to a non-Witness, which is rather exceptional, she still upholds the Society’s view of family life. Contrary to the majority of women in the GDR who interrupted their employment after giving birth to a child for only a short time (Dölling 1989, 34; Helwig 2003, 275), the mothers of my interviewees stayed at home longer and often never returned to full time work, while the majority of female Witnesses I interviewed did the same. They instead are responsible for the bulk of the “pioneering work” (i.e. proselytizing), while the husband provides for the family. This sort of decision is usually presented as having been made mutually by a married couple as the best solution for the well-being of the family as a whole. Such a view of marriage was, in fact, one commonly shared in East German society. Writing about young people at the end of the GDR, Irene Dölling points out that particularly “boys (like their fathers) see themselves in traditional terms as responsible for women and as material providers for the family” (1989, 34). She argues further that the norms, evaluations, and interpretations associated with the gender-specific division of labor had not disappeared, in spite of the significant increase in the number of employed women with higher education or vocational training, and the opening of occupational opportunities for women, particularly in the industrial sector, in the 1960s and 1970s (1989, 31–37).

A man in his mid-sixties, born into a third-generation family of Jehovah’s Witnesses recalled this moment:

We said right from the beginning that we were married for a long while before our son was born, that my wife would stay at home. I mean, in the GDR it was unusual since everybody worked there – the women – and the kids were in kindergarten. And we said: no, we won’t do that. She looks after the house. There is a completely different atmosphere in the

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5 At the end of the 1980s, almost 80 percent of women capable of work were employed in the GDR (Helwig 2003, 276). According to Irene Dölling, over 90 percent of all women who could work did so, of which 30 percent, however, worked in part-time jobs (1989, 36; Lemke 1989, 67).
family. You can spend more time together and do without other things instead. Not everyone can do it, or has to. (…) We thought it would be the best for us and (…) I definitely think that we chose our stance successfully.

This decision had the intended result for the family: their only child became a pioneer, is married to a Witness and works at a Bethel Factory in West Germany.

In the GDR, the children of Witnesses were kept at home as long as possible, i.e. until the first year of primary school. This contradicted the GDR practice of sending children to state nurseries and kindergartens, but was seen as a key moment in forming children's religious identity. The state child-rearing policy supported socialization at public facilities\(^6\) not only for ideological reasons, but also due to the shortage of labor and the mobilization of women as a labor force (Lemke 1989, 66).

Besides common arguments, including the children's welfare and the political education provided in nurseries and kindergartens, Witness parents living in Chemnitz also mentioned health reasons. A full repertoire of arguments is clearly visible in the following in which a female Witness in her mid-sixties recounts the late 1980s in Karl-Marx-Stadt, now Chemnitz:

I wanted to raise my daughter on my own. So we didn’t put her in a nursery. At that time I stopped working and stayed at home (…) First, he [husband – M.R.] always had shift work. That was a total catastrophe. First off, you have nothing to do with your child when you put it in a nursery and everything, and the political education, no [thanks]. That already started in the nursery: (…) Mom, we painted a red workers’ flag today and things like that (…) The women worked. They were exhausted in the evening and just picked up their children. Some let them stay in the nursery for a whole week (…) And the whole upbringing and learning to deal with everything. (…) Sometimes you came home from the night shift early. Smoke everywhere from coal heating and the factories here. You know, early when the sun rose, when it was cold in winter, it forced the fumes down. I couldn’t air out the bedroom until noon. The city was filled with a biting smog. (…) It stank outside. Then mothers came with their kids very quickly because they didn’t have time and the little rascals had to [laughs] they all were, they all had… they had bronchitis in the school.

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\(^6\) Over 90 percent of children between three and six years were in kindergartens, and around two-thirds of all children between six months and three years spent part of their day in nurseries (Lemke 1989, 66).
Just like the young man mentioned above, the daughter of this married couple has become a Witness as well. Despite the political, social, and environmental changes since 1990, the children of Jehovah’s Witnesses are now still raised entirely at home until they are legally obliged to go to primary school.

In an interview with a female Witness in the early days of April, a three-year old boy, the youngest son of my interviewee, played in the same room while we were talking. When boredom set in, his mother told him to get a book with Bible stories from another room. The child hurried back, triumphantly carrying a worn book. He opened it and pointed to a story that his mother named. After I asked him to show me Jesus and the apostles he pointed to the right pictures in the book. This is in fact quite a common scene among Witness, and books of Bible stories are usually the first book that children get to see. Children are taught to read on the basis of a book containing stories about Moses and other biblical characters. Moreover, the ability to read is not important as an end in itself; it is only a means to an end. It enables children to read the Bible and thus to gain knowledge about God. What one reads is therefore extremely important as well. Not even all Bible stories are suitable for children as, from the perspective of the Society, parents are obliged to choose and control the right “spiritual nutrition” for their children:

> There are in fact many stories in the Bible that are … suited as goodnight stories. To get children excited you have to choose – but not everything. Just like a child does not eat everything, we have to choose it as well and tell then what they can eat. That’s the way it is with the Bible, too. One can read a lot with a child, but for other things you have to wait until they’re older.

Jehovah’s Witnesses do not baptize infants. As I heard many times during lectures there, faith is not something that children experience only by way of their parents. Both children and adults alike are to follow the example of Jesus and have to work on their Christian identity. In my interviewees’ view, children are “a present from Jehovah” and parents are only entrusted with them. As I was told, this is in fact a question of responsibility. From this religious perspective, parents are responsible for their children who – in turn – are protected by parental faith. In an act of baptism, a child alone takes responsibility in the eyes of Jehovah. Until then, Witness parents devote time and effort to educating their own children in accordance with what they consider to be the principles of the Bible (A. and H.-H. Dirksen 2002; Holden 2004). Their
Socialization work is encouraged and supported by the Society which produces a large amount of literature addressed to children and their parents (including children's publications and articles in the “Watchtower” and “Awake!”). This view resembles the attitude toward children observed by Sally Gallagher in a conservative Baptist church in the Northwest United States. She argues that in this church “the emphasis is less on children as junior members of the church per se, and more on children as objects of adult nurture, teaching, and mission” (2007, 175; original italics). And as we shall see further in this text, both the socialist state and the Jehovah’s Witnesses considered the child-rearing process as crucial to their development.

In some rather exceptional cases, the process of socialization began even before a child’s birth. A pregnant woman, for example, used to listen to “praise songs” in order to familiarize her unborn baby with the Jehovah’s Witness music. The explanations and answers to children’s questions are commonly loaded with religious content. One male Witness in his fifties, baptized at the age of 14 and the father of three children, describes the way he was raised by his Witness parents and in turn raised his own children in the following:

Well, it is most important actually that … one that one develops a belief (Glaube) in God at all. Children have a lot of questions, right, children are full of questions. When they see a flower: what is it and who made it? Or when they look at a starry sky – the stars in the sky. And then one can always explain to the children that this did not come into being by accident but was made by a loving, intelligent Creator. And although we can't see this God, we owe our life to him. Gratitude is actually the most important (…) When there was something beautiful, a beautiful sunset, we didn't just say that the sunset was beautiful but we said that Jehovah made this beautiful, right? And that is the way a personal connection, a relationship comes about.

A Jehovah’s Witness mother in her mid-forties, raised in a family of Witnesses and baptized at the age of 16, recounted her own religious education:

The most important thing my dad instilled in me was to have a profound respect for our Creator, Jehovah God (…) He [showed] us plants and a single small animal and used them to show us how much love had been expressed and I have really to say, as a small child Jehovah God was for me a real person (…) And of course my parents stressed that we should learn the fundamentals of the Bible. That we should love our neighbors as ourselves. Reading the Bible as a family was considered very important.
In their educational endeavors, Jehovah’s Witnesses stress a personal relationship with God, Bible-based principles as well as a belief in creationism (A. and H.-H. Dirksen 2002). These are the pillars that children's beliefs are expected to be founded on. On the other hand, in the literature and lectures of the Society, one is always reminded that a personal relationship with Jehovah is based on an adherent's knowledge of him, as is reflected in the Bible and can be heard at congregation meetings. Witness parents I talked to harbor no doubts on the need for even small children to attend a congregation. As the woman quoted above said:

When the children are but one or two days old we take them to the congregation with us. They are from the beginning becoming familiar with the God’s word but also with the community (Gemeinschaft) of brothers and sisters. I have to say that the study in the congregation is very important, but also the family life.

It has been pointed out that the ability that Witness children gain in the course of their socialization to sit quietly for a long time, to listen carefully, and to respect adults makes them perfect pupils at school (Holden 2004).

Most women take even small children on door-to-door proselytizing excursions, something that many Witnesses, both men and women, in fact used to do during the GDR period. Almost from the beginning, children are also taken to the meetings in congregation halls, to congresses, and take part in Bible studies at home. During my fieldwork it was quite common to see children answering questions posed to an entire audience during a meeting in a Kingdom Hall. Hours of study are involved for each small raised hand. A ‘small’ children’s book study is an obligatory part of the religious education of Witness children. One of the aforementioned Witnesses describes a typical process of socialization in the GDR in the following:

My parents were Jehovah’s Witnesses and I grew up like that. We held, I remember, our Bible study at home, we read the Bible regularly, and we got together with brothers as well, but only in our homes, because at the time, during the GDR, it was not free. But there were always six to eight people there and we discussed the Bible regularly. And we heard a lot for the first time, and took it on board, and learned it, got it in our heads.

A regular weekly one-hour children's study is a Witness standard today, which is of course, one hour in addition to everything else. Children listen to Bible stories and accompany their parents to other religious activities. Children between the ages of 12 and 14 do not only get
involved in evangelization, but are also given special tasks in role-play sessions on a Kingdom Hall stage (Holden 2004). To be given such a task is considered by adult Witnesses to be an honor and privilege for a child; although not all children are necessarily of this opinion. Short household talks are held at the Ministry School (one of weekly meetings of the Jehovah's Witnesses); their aim is to prepare Witnesses for effective evangelizing work.

**Between coercion and exemplification**

In his study on British Witnesses, Holden argues that “the Governing Body propounds the view that well-mannered children are the products of good adult example” (2004, 126). As a general remark characterizing Society policy this is certainly true. Yet, in everyday life the issue is more complicated than that.

As mentioned above, Witness parents are responsible for the religious upbringing of their children. All Witness parents want to see their children as a part of the religious community they belong to and would make every effort necessary to lead them to Jehovah. An act of baptism reflects an absolute commitment to God. And only those who are baptized are considered to be Jehovah’s Witnesses in the proper sense of the word (“baptized publishers”). Children between the ages of 14 and 18 are expected to decide whether they want to be a Witness or not. They are not, however, under pressure to make this decision quickly, and are free to decide when they want to be baptized as soon as they pass what could be called “exams” given by elders. All the Witnesses that I interviewed stressed that the decision to be baptized was the child’s free choice. Witness parents are thus given a special task of showing one’s child the ‘light of the truth’ in the hope that they also recognize this truth. As it is the case in the Baptist community described by Gallagher “becoming a member of the church is an adult-like decision. Something children grow up to do” (2007, 180). During one interview with a married couple in their mid-thirties, the parents of two children, a father described their endeavors: “There is nothing better than setting one’s own example. When somebody has a hobby and wants his child to take it up, then he must be convinced of his hobby (…) It is all about attitudes (…) there’s nothing else. There is no other recipe.”

Providing a good example and offering Bible-based arguments are not the only methods applied by Witness parents and approved by the
Society. The picture of the parent-child relationship presented in the movement’s literature is one of the parent having the right to speak and expect obedience from the child. In accordance with the Bible, children should obey their parents and respect them. Although I have observed that Witnesses are very much devoted to their children, showing them much love and giving them much time, they are nonetheless usually very strict as parents. In another part of my interview with the aforementioned couple, the father opened up and said:

That's why I always have to say that it is, to answer the question of force, it is, to be perfectly honest, up to a certain age, indeed a matter of force. Because, I can't really just tell my ten-year-old “Listen, we're going to the [congregation] meeting tonight, and then you can decide for yourself what you're going to do.” They would of course just say that they’d stay home on the couch and watch TV (…) That’s the way it is up to a certain age, dunno maybe twelve, thirteen, when they start to think about things for themselves – and deciding is being forced in a way (…) we have to honestly say that it is a certain kind of force. But it is force like everywhere else as well. We have … obligations. I would say obligation, which doesn't sound as severe. We have compulsory schooling in Germany, have to compel or force my child to go to school, whether they want to or not, that’s just the way it is.

Growing up in a Jehovah’s Witness family may be presented in terms of force on the one hand and modeling through one’s own life on the other. However consistent and rigorous their parents’ behavior may have been, many interviewees argued that they recognized that it was for their own sake and dictated by parental love. Children, Gallagher writes, “appear less as metaphors of faith, and more as recipients of adult nurture, teaching, discipline, and care” (2007, 177).

**Educational paths**

Holden (2004) argues that, although Witness children are disciplined readers and listeners, they are not high academic achievers. Witnessing requires an inordinate amount of learning; this “passive” learning does not encourage critical thinking or analytical skills. It is rather “a mechanistic system of stimulus-response that resembles traditional classroom teaching” (Holden 2004, 134). The same method has been practiced by Witnesses in eastern Germany, especially during the GDR period. Because of the lack of necessary literature Witness children and adults alike memorized Bible verses, entire paragraphs of text, and Bible stories.
The literature on the education and professional training of (young) Jehovah’s Witnesses seems to be useful only to a certain extent for the purpose of this study. On the one hand, major works on the topic have analyzed studies conducted in the democratic countries of the West (see, for instance, Beckford 1975 and Holden 2004 for Britain; Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980 for Belgium; and Penton 1985, Stark and Iannaccone 1997 for the United States and Canada). According to these studies members of the religious movement generally come from the (lower) middle class and not – as is generally assumed – from the working class (Beckford 1975; Stark and Iannaccone 1997). Moreover, being a Jehovah’s Witness does not seem to induce downward social mobility (Beckford 1975; Dobbelaere and Wilson 1980). Nonetheless, it is generally agreed that Witnesses tend to undervalue higher education.

On the other hand, the literature on the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Eastern Germany is dominated by the socio-historical analysis of the persecutions that the religious minority faced in the GDR (see, for instance, Besier and Vollnhals 2003; Dennis 2006; Hacke 2000; Wrobel 2006). As Annegret and Hans-Hermann Dirksen rightly observe, the fate of young Witnesses under the GDR regime requires further study (A. Dirksen 2006; A. and H.-H. Dirksen 2002). One might add that there virtually no study has been devoted to the formal education of eastern German Witnesses after the Wende.

The picture that emerges from my own study is clearly a multidimensional one. The educational opportunities of young people brought up in Witness families in the 1950s significantly differ from those in the 1970s or the late 1980s. We have already seen that political issues played a key role in the process of the persecution of Witnesses in the GDR. However, ‘soft’ factors such as the individual locations (e.g. whether Saxony or Mecklenburg; urban or rural) or the number of Witnesses in a given school also influenced the situation and have to be taken into account. It is impossible to present a comprehensive history of persecution and surveillance of Jehovah’s Witnesses in the GDR. However, some dates are worth recalling, with political neutrality

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7 In contrast to Saxony, Mecklenburg was considered to be more “red,” loyal to the state, and kept under stronger surveillance by the Stasi. Beginning about 1970, Witnesses who were caught preaching were punished with administrative fines of between 200–300 marks (cf. H.-H. Dirksen 2006; Dennis 2006). My interviewees argued that Witnesses who preached in Mecklenburg were issued higher fines of about 500 marks.
playing a central role in the whole process. While Jehovah's Witnesses owe their primary loyalty to God, they are required to obey the laws of the state in which they live unless they conflict with those of God (Lawson 1995; Penton 1985).

In 1962 a law on compulsory military service was introduced in the GDR. Witnesses objected to this military service for reasons of conscience and based on the biblical view of political neutrality. As Dennis writes, “they therefore see themselves as soldiers in God's army, not of the secular state, which, whether democratic or authoritarian, is, like the oppressive commercial system, part of the world of Satan the Devil” (2006, 147). For most male Witnesses in my study, their objection to military service resulted in about twenty months of imprisonment.

In 1978 the SED imposed compulsory theoretical and practical pre-military training in schools for pupils aged 14 to 16. This proved to be disastrous for the educational and professional careers of many Witnesses (cf. A. and H.-H. Dirksen 2002).

Surprisingly, many Jehovah's Witnesses I talked to admitted that they had almost no problems at school and were accepted both by pupils and teachers. A woman in her mid-sixties who started her education in 1950 said:

We just didn't attend religion class. And we didn't join the Pioneers. They still accepted that back then. But that was the kind of small place where we were just two families, practically four kids in the whole school who weren't pioneers. All the church people in fact became pioneers.

Adult Witnesses and their children do not participate in any political or national activities. During the GDR period, therefore, Witness children did not take part in socialist organizations such as the Young Pioneers (Junge Pioniere), the Thälmann Pioneers, and the Free German Youth (Freie Deutsche Jugend - FDJ). It was the Witness parents who made the decision concerning the Young Pioneers, as they were convinced of the political nature of its meetings. Teachers either claimed the opposite or only invited Witness children to non-political meetings. A woman in her mid-forties brought up in a family of Witnesses explained:

I was not a Pioneer or a member of the FDJ because I am a Jehovah's Witness. And I take a stand for our creator, Jehovah God. And I know that he built up his government in heaven, and that the heavenly government is the only solution for humankind. I even understood that well back then. And if I had been a Pioneer or FDJ member, I would have supported a political system that God does not like. And the Bible says
that God – that all governments of this earth are run by Satan the Devil. And I surely would not have supported something run by Satan. And I – or my parents – decided right away, when I started school at the age of six – they said that our child will not become a Young Pioneer and will not be a member of the FDJ. But when I got bigger, I was able to explain my point of view myself as well.

Although Witness interviewees brought up in the GDR have generally good memories of their primary school days, they still admit that they were marginalized, felt like outsiders, or as if they had missed out on something. Gerald Hacke rightly points out that “young Jehovah's Witnesses experienced social isolation,” and that “it required courage and a willingness to brave bad grades and a certain isolation within the class” (2000, 85; cf. Besier and Vollnhals 2003; A. Dirksen 2006). As a man in his early fifties born into a family of Jehovah's Witnesses put it:

There were surely times when people admired us, and even times when they derided us. (...) There were many political activities at the time, political holidays and their celebrations in school that we did not take part in, or where we went but just kept quiet. When they raised the flag, for instance, and everyone stood there and there were particular (...) salutes and slogans, we didn't take part (mitgemacht). And that really varied, among the teachers as well. There were teachers who accepted that, who tolerated that, and then there were teachers who tried to exert the power of their positions. That was of course unpleasant (...) There were always occasions like these, you know, when the whole class had their [Pioneer] neckerchiefs on except me. Or the whole class had a blue shirt, the FDJ shirt on, and I was wearing a checkered one. Then you really stand out, you know, on days like that. There were actually days when we were, you can say, obliged to wear the FDJ shirt. Or wear the neckerchief. And everyone saw that in school, what's wrong with him? He is not a Pioneer, not a member of the FDJ. Everyone of course knew who you were (...) a major exception.

Irrespective of any political situation, Witness children do not celebrate any holidays, such as birthdays, Christmas, Easter, or May Day (Labor Day) celebrations. Even in a country as secularized as East Germany, this issue has posed a significant problem. I was told several stories of non-Witness grandparents who secretly tried to give their grandchildren a birthday present or give something to them at Christmas. Adult Witnesses I talked to argued that they gave their

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8 Christmas was celebrated even by communists in the GDR. According to my interviewees it was called a “feast of family,” a “feast of joy,” or – in the Erzgebirge
children presents without any occasion; many also admit that they received small presents from their parents when they least expected.

Witnesses did not show political commitment to and social enthusiasm for the development of East Germany. Although the GDR constitutions (of 1949, 1968, and 1974) guaranteed the freedom of religion, the Marxist-Leninist state ideology stipulated that religion would die out with the advance of socialism (Daiber 1988; Weber 2000). The SED did not only claim possession of the (Marxist-Leninist) truth but, in line with Lenin, was responsible for “political consciousness-raising” (Lemke 1989, 61). Instead of waiting passively for the “slow death” of religion, the SED actively pursued its policy of political education of political consciousness from the very beginning. In this context, let us look into two domains that were heavily influenced by the implementation of this policy. Firstly, new symbols and rituals were introduced that were meant to replace religious ones (e.g. Protestant confirmation) and to apply a new socialist interpretation to East German life. At the end of the GDR era, the German sociologist Christiane Lemke wrote: “As part of political culture, rites mainly serve to foster socialist identity, integrate individuals and groups, and thus stabilize the political system” (1989, 64). The Jugendweihe, the socialist coming-of-age ritual, was clearly one of the most prominent of these. The ceremony was introduced in 1954 for students completing the eighth grade. In the ceremony, the students publicly committed themselves to the socialist ideology by accepting the GDR as their state and upholding civic virtues. Secondly, the educational system was seen to be the most important instrument of implementing the Marxism-Leninism ideology. The FDJ was established in 1946 as a preparatory stage for later party officials and a mass organization responsible for the socialist upbringing of the youth. The Young Pioneers were then established in 1948 and the Thälmann Pioneers for older children. In order to ensure a successful socialization process a network of socialization agents had thus been developed and expected to work closely together, i.e. schools, mass organizations, and parents (Lemke 1989, 69). The goal of this socialization process was the formation of a “socialist personality” or

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region – a “feast of light.” The celebrations were stripped of their religious background and were just seen as a good opportunity to meet together as a family.

*Interestingly, the ceremony itself did not disappear with the end of socialism. During the GDR era, 95 percent of every age group took part in this ritual. While there are no exact data for the entire area of the former GDR after 1989, the data for Saxony show an interesting trend: 95 percent in 1989, about 40 percent in 1992, but over 55 percent again in 1996 (Döhnert 2000, 236).*
in Hermann Weber’s words, a German historian of the GDR, “a man living in conformity with the SED” (2000, 68). According to Christiane Lemke, “by definition this personality follows the precepts of socialist morality, such as community spirit, feelings of duty and responsibility toward the state and society, and an optimistic outlook on life and the aims of socialism” (1989, 60; see also Schröder 1999). Ideally, this socialization process was meant to form young people into faithful citizens of the socialist state.

Unlike the members of established churches, especially those of the Protestant churches who often celebrated both their confirmation and the Jugendweihe, and took part in mass organizations, Jehovah’s Witnesses and their children did not take part in any political or national activities. It might be said that in a broader sense – and this was in fact the understanding of the GDR authorities – this was a question of competing loyalties to God and to the state. According to historically malleable interpretation of Romans 13:1 (“Let every soul be in subjection to the superior authorities”), Witnesses should obey the laws of the country in which they live unless they conflict with those of God. On the other hand, however, they should also remain politically neutral (e.g. avoiding voting, holding public offices, or serving in the military).

We can say that Witness parents were caught up in the educational discourse of the socialist state. In this discourse the educational process was perceived not only as an instrument of transmitting knowledge, but especially as an instrument used to bring about a socialist upbringing. The “Ten Commandments” of the Young Pioneers indeed stressed the values of diligence, discipline, and socialist duty (e.g. A. and H.-H. Dirksen 2002). Loyalty to the state and socialist attitudes were usually considered to be more important than any school achievements measured in grades. Grades were indeed often marked down for a lack of the ‘right’ attitude. Witness children were usually the only ones in their classes not to join the Pioneers (beginning with the Young Pioneers in primary school). And thus, beginning with primary school, parents had to enter into a continual dialogue with school directors and teachers in order to defend their religious position and set boundaries. As Holden rightly points out, “Witness parents, perhaps more

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10 Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania 2006. The verse continues: “Let every soul be in subjection to the superior authorities, for there is no authority except by God; the existing authorities stand placed in their relative positions by God.”
than any other, find themselves in constant dialogue with governors, teachers and other educational administrators who work within a system that does not always operate in accordance with Watch Tower doctrines” (2004, 136). The truth of this evaluation has been borne out both in the GDR and in today’s world, albeit for different reasons.

Since German unification, Witness parents have been engaged in an educational discourse with school authorities on their own terms. Now offered a choice between ethics and religion classes, Witness children always attend ethics classes. We have already seen that Jehovah’s Witnesses do not celebrate any holidays. Witness children are therefore not allowed to take part in any activity connected with such holidays and it is the teacher’s responsibility to provide them with different tasks instead. The following is a good example of the radical changes that took place over the past 20 years. A Witness mother in her mid-forties said:

The teachers are very tolerant. They value our children. And they like our children, too. And when there are holidays like Christmas or when, for example, there are also trips to youth hostels for three or four days, and the teachers know that our children won’t come. And they accept it. They are even kind enough to sometimes say that the children should stay home and that they’ll give them something else to do, that’s okay. When the children get older, there is peer pressure, though, and that is quite hard. A number of young people then give up – sometimes. But for our children, they don’t talk about it that much. They are not made fun of, and get along well with their schoolmates. And they even talk about their faith (Glauben).

In the late 1950s, refusing to participate in political activities (flag salutes, parades, morning assemblies, etc.) and especially not joining the mass organizations made it impossible for Witness children to study for the Abitur exams and diploma at Extended Upper Schools (Erweiterte Oberschule) and as a result to attend university (Dennis 2006; A. Dirksen 2006; A. and H.-H. Dirksen 2002). Even very good pupils who were willing to study were deprived of this right and worked in apprenticeships instead. Following the introduction of pre-military training, Jehovah’s Witnesses were no longer even able to do that. In a few cases, parents were able to reach a compromise with their children’s schools. The man in his early fifties, baptized at the age of 14, and now the father of three children, recollected:

I wanted actually, well, to become a building fitter and was the first in my class to become an apprentice. Because I had very good grades, that was what spoke for me of course, I was actually always the best in the class
(...) And then we had, well, this was an apprenticeship contract that included a pre-military training (...) And my father then, he had to sign it and me too, and we wrote that, due to our beliefs, due to reasons of religion and conscience, I would not take part in pre-military training. And then my boss started, the person in charge of apprenticeships said: this does not bother me at all. And he signed it too. And then the contract went to the authorities. And there was a district council (Rat des Kreises) back then, something similar to today’s city offices or something like that, and it was all over. We had to go there and the contract was cancelled. (...) And I had to work as an unskilled worker without training (...) Low wages and bad work all the time (...) Things that nobody else wanted to do (...) That’s the way it started. (...) We looked for factories then, and many Jehovah’s Witnesses did the same, where you could find a job in a place that wasn’t so political. Sometimes there was no choice, but most Jehovah’s Witnesses looked for a job where they did not stand out too much (...) Later on (...) I attended an evening school, improved my qualifications after work, everything that I could. I knew how to weld and got a welder’s certificate.

Soon thereafter, this interviewee was called to serve in the military and refused, then receiving a twenty-month prison sentence. At that time he was already married and had a three-year-old child. The imprisonment of a family member was yet another way that Witness children were affected by the GDR regime (A. Dirksen 2006).

It is worth mentioning that many Witnesses worked in small family-run companies during the GDR era and not with state-run companies (VEB, Volkseigener Betrieb). They were probably the only places where political pressure was low and the workers’ salaries and benefits did not depend on participating in socialist political activity.

Witness children born in the mid-1970s and later were largely free to choose any course of educational training they wished, free from the political constraints of the socialist state. The question then emerges, however, how many of them decided to pursue professional careers or to attend university. In light of my interviews, lectures at Kingdom Halls and congresses, and the literature published by the Society this is not, however, the most important question. A man in his early thirties, baptized at the age of 16 and now the father of two children, who finished his primary school education around 1990, said:

I really wanted to go to university. Well, actually, I wanted to stay in school after tenth grade, go to eleventh, twelfth grade. A little more

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11 After 1986, Jehovah’s Witnesses were no longer punished for refusing military service (Dennis 2006; H.-H. Dirksen 2006).
school, since I was really good in school. And then there was of course the question – foreign languages, FDJ, Pioneers. But I had done none of that. And my father also said to me: “Take care my son that you set the right priorities in life, take care what you make of your life. If you live your faith, an excellent education wouldn't help you anyway.” And from my current point of view I can only say that he was right (…) I went through a fully normal training program because the GDR was over then. (…) I began my training in ’91, I think, and it was all different then. Even since ’89 it is, it was, I think the when the GDR ended, ’88 or ’89 it was already a little less, a little more relaxed.

The following is an excerpt from an interview with a married woman in her mid-twenties, who was baptized at the age of 12. The young woman's educational career can be seen to follow a model that corresponds closely with the movement's doctrine. While secondary education is important and recommended both by Witness parents and the Watch Tower authorities, they do not place their priority on secular education but on religious education instead. Young Witnesses are expected to complete their education and to serve God and the Society as pioneers, i.e. missionaries of the God's Word. As a speaker expressed it during a three-day congress in Chemnitz in July 2007: “One should use one's abilities and talents first and foremost for Jehovah.” Another elder preaching at the same congress argued in more pragmatic terms that higher education, i.e. study at a university, not only takes time that should be spent in a service for God but is no guarantee for either a job or success.

And then [after elementary school] I decided to attend Gymnasium [an academic secondary school]. But then I, since it was clear to me from the very beginning, I didn't necessarily want to achieve a higher education, to go to university, I thought, it would be better that you only finish 10th grade and then learn a trade and then you can be finished faster and can have more time to give to Jehovah. (…) Since grades were not a problem, I could have continued. But I opted for a traineeship instead. My dream job [laughter] I trained as a doctor's assistant and I really loved it. [laughter] And I finished 10th grade in the Gymnasium and then started my training, that was then 3 years. And after my training I worked for another full year at the doctor's office where I was a trainee. And then I only worked part-time so that I could then (…) become a full-time [Jehovah's Witness] pioneer.

After completing her training she has held a part-time job and devoted her time as a pioneer in an eastern German region where there are not enough publishers, and which therefore receives particular attention.
We can conclude that during the GDR era, the socialist state deprived Jehovah’s Witnesses of educational and professional opportunities solely due to their faith, a situation that would change, however, immediately following German unification. It is no longer the state that prevents young Witnesses from studying or pursuing a professional career. Instead, just like in other Western countries, young eastern German Witnesses may follow Society teachings that give priority to faith instead of career ambitions.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to illustrate the situation of young Jehovah’s Witnesses in the GDR. Brought up in a society in which the “religious norm” was—and indeed still is—not to belong to any religious group (Daiber 1988; Pollack 2000), members of this banned religious minority managed to develop and maintain their religious identity. Young Witnesses caught up in the educational discourse of the socialist state on the one hand, and the socialization endeavors of their Christian parents on the other, were taught at an early age how to defend their own religious position and to set boundaries. Being a Witness child has, to a great extent, meant fulfilling the same duties and expectations that the Society sets for its adult members. During the socialist era, Witness children rapidly learned the importance and consequences of their own and their family’s choice. Since German unification, however, they have learned to play a more active role as well. They rarely miss an occasion to talk about their faith, for example, whenever offered the opportunity to present a topic of their choice in a school ethics class, even if they are the only ones in class willing to talk about religion at all. This socialization model proved successful both in the GDR and after unification as a means of introducing faith to their children’s lives and of retaining the most children in the movement. In any event, it certainly contributed to the survival of this persecuted religious minority during the socialist regime.

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References


CHAPTER SEVEN

YOUNG EASTERN GERMANS AND THE RELIGIOUS AND IDEOLOGICAL HERITAGE OF THEIR PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS

Anja Frank

Eastern Germany is considered to be one of the most areligious regions in the world. Numerous reasons have been offered for this, including the monopolistic position of Protestantism, the history of secularist movements, and the secularizing effect of National Socialism. It is, however, the political repression of the ruling Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) that is most commonly mentioned as a cause of the enduring massive decline of religious affiliation and belief in the region. While 91 percent of eastern Germans were members of a Christian church in 1949, the number would fall to 25 percent within the next 40 years (Pollack 2000). Contrary to the general expectation that religious movements would begin to spread across eastern Germany after reunification, it has instead continued to decline ever since, and being non-denominational or considering oneself to be unreligious or atheistic is still the norm.¹ About half of all eastern Germans now consider themselves to be explicitly non-believing or atheist. There is, however, also statistical evidence of a certain, though moderate religious revitalization – limited to small numbers of younger eastern Germans. Taking these statistical results into account, the article pursues the question of what religious vitalization could mean in the specific secular context of eastern Germany and on which dynamics it is based.

It is useful to have a closer look at the different generations to make a few distinctions. While 38 percent of those born before 1930 do not believe in God, this figure rises to 70 percent for those born between 1961 and 1974 (Wohlrab-Sahr 2002). For young eastern Germans born after 1975 the development seems to be inverted: Only 57 percent of

¹ 21 percent of the eastern Germans are members of Protestant churches, while 4 percent belong to the Catholic Church. (see also Christof Wolf 2001). In western Germany more than 80 percent of the population belong to the Protestant or Catholic churches.
them say that they do not believe in God, meaning that this number is declining, even as it continues to rise in western Germany (Wohlrab-Sahr 2002). Comparing data from the German Social Survey (ALLBUS), 1991 and 2002 figures also show that young eastern Germans between 18 and 29 years of age are open to religious ideas, and while they are still predominantly secular, there is in fact a rising interest in religious questions, mostly outside church settings. This particularly concerns the question of the afterlife and the relevance of magic, spiritism, and occultism, which can all indeed be interpreted in general as a consideration of transcendence. The number of young people who believe in an afterlife has in fact risen from 15 percent to 34 percent within ten years (ALLBUS 2002, 107, V 153). The numbers concerning magic, spiritism, and occultism are similar, with 80 percent, but only 68 percent of younger people, rejecting these beliefs. Told to react to the statement that one should rely only on what can be explained by reason, the results are similar, bringing the younger generation in line with the generation of their grandparents and in contrast with the generation of their parents. Peculiarly, however, the number of those believing in God did not itself rise. One can assume that this does not therefore reflect an opening towards specific Christian ideas but rather an increase in religious doubt, with neither the numbers of churchgoers or church members increasing (Jagodzinski 2000). Meulemann (2003) has also stressed that there has been no spontaneous return to Christian beliefs.

What does this opening towards religious ideas mean, particularly with regard to subjective interpretations of the self and the world? What are the subjective motives behind this? How are these interpretations relevant to individual experience and action, and how does this relate to the older generations? What has happened to the people’s religious and ideological heritage?

Considering the statistical differences between the generations, it seems helpful to use a generational framework to understand and explain the religious changes. Generations are involved in the process of change in different ways. They consider changes and new developments in their own ways, with disparities emerging. The concept of generations will be used in the sense of familial generations here. The family constitutes the locus where differences between generations meet and have to be dealt with.

This article is based on the findings of a study that took a close look at young eastern Germans and at their different ways of approaching
religion, focusing both on the role of religious approaches in individual lives as well as the relationships between familial generations. The study was part of a research project that was carried out in Leipzig, Saxony from 2003 to 2006. The subject of this project was the religious and ideological change in the GDR and eastern Germany, focusing on the perspectives of different generations and taking conflict-theoretical elements into consideration. In order to explore the subjective side, 25 family interviews were conducted with representatives of three generations who were asked to tell the story of their families. The older generations often dominated the conversation in these discussions, especially when providing a family history. In order to capture the particular motives of the youngest generation, 11 additional biographical interviews were conducted in part with interviewees who had taken part in the family interviews, and partly with others from less intact families who could not therefore have had a family interview. In this sort of interview the interviewees could also elaborate in greater detail on their individual experiences. The interviewees were asked to tell their life stories, with the interviewer then asking questions about the meaning of life, the afterlife, and their ideas on what makes up a good society, all as a means of eliciting their views on religious matters.

One of the chief theses of the research project is that an important element of the SED’s success and the success of the secularization process was the introduction of an interpretational frame constructing a non-reconcilable conflict between politics and religion, in terms of a general tension between different ‘value spheres.’ The success of the secularization process in the GDR is thus closely interrelated with this conflictive framework. In this regard, politics competed with religion in three dimensions: membership (church or party), worldview (science vs. religion), and ethics (Christian vs. Marxist ethics). The dichotomy between politics and religion and between science and religion did not therefore involve forms of repression alone, but acquired a subjective plausibility for much of the population (some of these results have been published in Karstein et al. 2006). In terms of worldview, the ‘scientific worldview’ (wissenschaftliche Weltanschauung), as it was known in the GDR, was launched as an explicit secularist counterpart to religious worldviews, delegitimizing the latter as backward in comparison with the acquisition of knowledge based on recent scientific research.

Keeping this ideological conflict in mind, this article will, following a short characterization of the younger generation that was interviewed,
introduce different ways of relating to religious and ideological ideas, delve into the role of religion in terms of generational relations, and conclude with some thoughts on the meaning of religious vitalization or desecularization within the context of religious-ideological and societal change in eastern Germany.

Young eastern Germans as a generation

The representatives of the younger generation described here experienced the transformations of 1989 during their adolescence. For most of them, this implied a widening of options and horizons with regard to religion as well. When societies undergo transformations, it is of particular significance when different generations take part in social changes in different ways. Younger generations play a particular role in this process since they are both related to the two older generations but also have to find their own means of coming to terms with a new society. In this sense they find themselves caught between individuation and familial continuity, in the shadow of a conflictual societal background that makes these tasks difficult to fulfill. This also concerns the sphere of religion and belief: The youngest generation has to cope with the religious and ideological heritage of their parents and grandparents while the development cannot be easily determined in any one way – whether to continue or to break up with their familial heritage. They instead develop specific ways to deal with it within this sphere of tension, as approaches to religion and ideology change from generation to generation. Even if they may seem to be continuous, they can serve as a starting point and engine for change within generations as well as a means of either solidarity or distinction towards older generations.

Religion and transcendence

In order to describe the religious elements in the biographical material it is necessary to clarify what religion entails here. Religion is defined here in connection with the theories of Niklas Luhmann and Thomas Luckmann. According to Luhmann, the typical function of religion is to relate “to the problem of simultaneity of indefiniteness and certainty,” the problems of contingency and sense (2000, 154). Religion refers to this problem with its specific code, the distinction between
Immanence and transcendence (Luhmann 2000, 127). It is helpful to further distinguish between the problem that religion relates to and the strategy religion uses to solve it, as Detlef Pollack has done (1995, 53). Religion refers to the social or individual problem of contingency or certainty and solves the problem by relating immanence and transcendence to each other, illustrating it through various symbols, rites, texts, etc. One may say, for example, that world-affirming religions are not concerned with transcendences because they focus only on immanent, everyday life, even as they remain concerned with religious problems, e.g. the problem of contingency.

Following on Luckmann’s theory of invisible religion it is possible to make certain distinctions within different levels of transcendence. In addition to his anthropological notion of transcendence, Luckmann unfolds a detailed phenomenological concept of transcendence. He distinguishes between three levels of transcendence: “small transcendences” within everyday life that refer to unexperienced things that may be experienced with immediacy, “intermediate transcendences” that refer to mediate experiences but also remain at the immanent level of everyday reality, i.e. that bridge time and space, and “great transcendences” that refer to something other than everyday reality. For Luckmann the “great transcendences” are specifically religious, and the historical religions are examples of such great transcendences. Many new religions, especially the world-affirming religions, appear to reach only the level of “intermediate transcendences” (Luckmann 1991, 168).

Religious worldviews or ideas therefore cover great transcendences. One may furthermore distinguish between specific and unspecific religious ideas. Specific religious ideas explicitly refer to a certain religious tradition e.g. the Christian tradition; unspecific religious ideas refer to great transcendences but do not pertain to specific religious traditions.

Religious vitalization and different approaches to religion – Religion as culture

The material from the biographical interviews conducted with the younger persons revealed two different types of relating to religious ideas. Religion was on one hand regarded as culture and on the other as an ideal or utopian construction in contrast to the present world.
In several cases religion was regarded as a cultural good. Characteristically the interviewees approached religion in a rather aestheticsized and experimental way, referring to religious knowledge in the form of “stories,” “heroes,” or as “Western culture.” They were interested in religion as a part of their own culture without taking on specific Christian ideas or other religious interpretations and semantics.

In such a case an interviewee, who shall be called Julia here, used the Bible as a treasure trove of myths and heroic stories. The interview was conducted in Leipzig in 2005: Julia was a 28-year-old student and had been baptized at the age of 14. Questions of religion and ideology did not play a role during the biographical interview. Julia spoke more about her religious ‘career,’ when the interviewer asked about the importance of religion in her life and her family, respectively. Julia came in contact with religion through her grandmother. Her grandmother and father both were Catholic but despite this Julia grew up in a secular, quite socialist family, mostly influenced by her mother who had an atheistic background. Her grandmother gave Julia her father’s school Bible when she was a child. The book gave her the opportunity to connect to the religious tradition of her grandmother and her father:

I connected with the book in a number of ways, for one the story, the cross in the room, and everything somewhat sublime, and then of course my father read the book as a kid and so I read it sometimes, too. And I always liked old books anyway and the old printing I liked a lot too, the old German (…)

Julia continued to describe what the book meant to her:

…and I read it the way you read a book like that. When I was nine, I think, or so, I think. And it was the Old Testament, wasn’t so interested in the New Testament but the story of creation and of course the story of Jesus left a strong impression on me, about how, how everything could happen, actually everything, so not the creation of the world, that didn’t matter so much to me, couldn’t imagine how that all happened but (…) these terrible stories left a strong impression that a brother would strike his brother dead and (…) that the father wanted to sacrifice his son or that the parents would cast out their son and (…) I mean Moses and then of course the story of Jesus always with all the injustices (…) I didn’t understand that, and read it again and again, and wanted to know why it was that way, and talked to my grandma about that a lot, even though I think, if I think about it now, her answers didn’t really satisfy my curiosity. So I had to just accept it as it was. The great suffering of those historical people and what shook me most is that it was all supposed to have really happened that way.
Julia explained that she was very impressed by the “bad stories,” the descriptions of the passions of Jesus, Moses etc. The religious content of the stories seemed to be of no importance for her, and she instead read the Old Testament “just like you read a book,” as a compilation of stories of martyrs speaking of “injustices” and “great suffering” without bringing the symbolic meaning of the stories into play. Julia understood them as plain stories and judged them for aesthetic reasons and their effect on her, whether they impressed her or shook her up. This could be one reason why she did not find the story of creation as interesting. Not the work of God but the quality of the plot was important to her. Her view of the religious text as “stories” and her characterization of it in terms of aesthetics reveals her distance to its religious content. In this sense, Julia can be seen to have regarded religion as culture. The stories seem to have had different meanings for grandmother and granddaughter, which may explain why her grandmother’s answers did not satisfy Julia’s curiosity. But talking about the stories connected the two, nevertheless. This approach to religion was not limited to religious “stories” but was also reflected in Julia’s approach to parts of the socialist ideology and their myths and heroes. Julia would eventually place the stories of the Old Testament, as heroic myths, on a par with the “passions” of anti-fascist figures such as Ernst Thälmann, who were stylized as the heroes of the Communist system.²

The rather aesthetical relation to religious contexts is also revealed when Julia describes her decision to be baptized:

I now think that it was something that I wanted to experience, to experience myself. On the one hand, what all these stories are, and on the other hand, of course, to somehow be inside it myself in this whole, the whole world that was like a fairy tale world, and I wanted to somehow find out what it would be like to belong to it officially. But I never did because we never went to the church, it was only the baptism (…) I arranged for it personally, while the others had their \textit{Jugendweihe}, I was baptized or something (…) I wanted to go to a church like that, was fascinated by it all, and wanted to be a part of it, because it was like that for so many

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² Ernst Thälmann, born 1886, was leader of the Communist Party (KPD) from 1925–1933. He was arrested by the Gestapo in 1933 and shot in 1944 in Buchenwald. Many schools, streets, public buildings, and companies were named after him in the GDR. The Pioneers, an organization for schoolchildren, was named after him in 1952 (\textit{Pionierorganisation Ernst Thälmann}), and older Pioneers (age 10–14) were in fact referred to as “Thälmann-Pioniere.” His name was omnipresent in schools and everyday life alongside the names of other KPD founders such as Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.
thousands of years, and I liked the tradition and the loftiness, while the *Jugendweihe* was just in some theater or some stage and they all sat around looking stupid and got a bouquet and money, and I didn’t care about that.

The baptism remains only an episode in Julia’s life and is not reflected in any religious practice or group membership. Julia presents her baptism as a personal experimental decision to test a certain group and the feeling of “really belonging to it.” In addition to her personal motives, it once again reveals her distance to any religious content, when Julia sets the “sublime” event of the baptism in contrast to the ordinary celebration of the *Jugendweihe*. The cultural nature of this approach becomes clearer with the aesthetic view of the baptism (if one reads ‘sublime’ as an aesthetic category) and when Julia describes the religious context as a “world of fairy tales.” She associated it with a tradition, entailing two different things: the ancient tradition of her (Western) culture; and her own particular family tradition. I will return to this theme below.

Her distance to religious content also showed when Julia joined a church youth group for a short time:

I later went to a youth group but more just to see what they were like there, the young people. I always had looked into various youth groups probably just to check if I would fit in there and then I was in, and then it occurred to me that I was Catholic and so I thought I could check out what it is like in a church youth group (…) whether it was maybe something for me, since I am baptized, but it wasn’t.

Julia tried the youth group for experimental reasons, one of a number youth groups she had tried in order to find out where she might fit in. The religious meaning and content of the group was of no particular interest to her. She did not indeed join the group for religious reasons, but being Catholic just gave her the opportunity to “check out” the church youth group as one group among others.

A distance towards religious interpretations and semantics was also apparent in cases when people joined religious groups on a more permanent basis, even when they were not only baptized church members but also regularly took part in religious meetings with their membership becoming an important part of their lives. In an interview conducted in Leipzig in 2003 with Susan, a 29-year-old woman, the interviewee described her path into a parish through its musical activities. Susan was baptized at the age of 29, just a short time before the
interview took place, into a Lutheran congregation. She stressed activities like the church choir as the central aspects of her membership.

(...) and then I wanted to sing in a choir regularly and because I didn't have connections to groups like that, the only opportunity was a church choir and also because I didn't want to have auditions. And somehow I came across the church choir and suddenly I was there regularly and not an anonymous church visitor but an active member (...) and regarding the liturgy and the musical tradition, which in fact is closely connected to the tradition of the church, well it was very fascinating and I always was attracted by it and it still attracts me.

Susan mentions two reasons for having become a member of the church. One was simply the wish to sing regularly with the church choir presenting the only opportunity for her to join as a beginner. The other, however, was the church being the custodian of the liturgy and musical tradition as part of the Western cultural heritage. She presents her decision to be baptized as the consequence of her activities in the church setting. She did not, however, join the church for actual religious reasons, and religion per se did not actually come into play in the interview. On the contrary, as another passage shows, the church service and particularly the creed remained strange to her. In the interview she described her discussion with the pastor before her baptism:

And he left many things open in a very positive way for me. And it was great that when we talked about the creed and the words “I believe in the holy Christian church” that he said: ‘Well, if you can’t say it, then you don’t have to.’

She stressed that the pastor did not force her into any religious or “inner” commitment and permitted Susan to remain silent during certain parts of the creed. Susan had particular trouble with the part about the Holy Church, the part that concerns the institutional and not individual aspect. The pastor also changed the baptism process for her, and it did not take place in public but only with family and friends. This is quite remarkable since baptism actually represents one’s admission to the congregation and the church. In this way, the baptism was detached from the congregation, and in this sense Susan speaks of her “own small ritual.”

The story of the baptism and her decision for it made up a major part of the interview. The decision to be baptized indeed has to be reflected intensively, since Susan was baptized as an adult and has no religious or church socialization or tradition. As reasons for her
decision to be baptized at all and for her decision for a Christian church setting she stresses the cultural aspects of church and of her church activities:

Yes, the question is why is it not Buddhism? I just noticed (...) that it is not our tradition here. There, we sing syllables so fast that you can't read them, and here you can get something out of it.

Considering the contingency of her decision for a specific religious setting like the Christian church and the Lutheran congregation in particular, Susan takes Buddhism as an example for the alternatives that arise when one has a free choice. She based her decision on the Christian church being part of her own culture, relating it especially to high Western culture and the musical tradition.

As the first example demonstrated, this younger generation has become the heir of the religious tradition of the grandparent generation and the ideology of the GDR while re-interpreting parts of it as well. If they join religious groups (and youth groups in particular) or take part in religious meetings, they only stay for a short time and membership remains an isolated episode in their biography, an experiment. Religion does not become relevant to their lives in general. Even if they join religious groups on a more permanent basis and their membership does become relevant, as in the second example, they do not necessarily take on the associated religious ideas or commitments. Religious content and commitments are of no importance in these individual arrangements. In both cases religion was regarded as cultural, and the decision to be baptized had several reasons, none of which were, however, religious. They list reasons for their membership that include the church as a guardian of cultural goods, and its being more a part of their culture than of any kind of personal beliefs.

Religion as an ideal or utopian construction contrary to the present world

The latter example above corresponds with a secular attitude that has not generally been given up although there has been an opening towards transcendences and unspecific religious ideas. In nearly all interviews conducted, the interviewees broke with strict atheistic positions mostly in contrast with their parents and/or grandparents. Transcendences in the form of ‘middle transcendences’ then came into consideration, while the interviewees did not take on Christian or
other specific religious interpretations nor did forms of religious affiliation emerge in most cases. This could be characterized as an ‘unspecific opening of horizons’ or as an ‘immanent widening of perspectives.’ Religious ideas are used as a basis for understanding, entailing an opening towards religion in the sense of not denying it as a possible way to interpret the world. Susan for example said: “I’d rather allow things to be possible than to exclude them.”

More important is the role of these ideas: They are used as an ideal or utopian construction contrary to the present world, which is mostly characterized and criticized as materialistic and egoistic. In most cases this refers to the capitalistic market system and is set in contrast to parents’ stories about the communist system, as the following description will show.

The interviewee Thomas, who was born in 1974, grew up in what he called a “typical atheist East German family,” where religion had no role to play, although his mother had in fact been baptized. The interview was conducted in Saxony in 2005. He predicted an increase of the importance of religion in societal life and imagined a “religiously inspired community thing” meaning a societal model where people would live and work together. For an ideological orientation he suggested a philosophy that he described as Buddhist and that would guarantee security and a meaning of life.

What would a good society be like? Well I think that a good society would be where goals other than the obvious ones would be important for the life of each individual. I have the impression that today’s society is mostly about consumerism, about accumulating things, and about getting rich, famous, and beautiful, or whatever. Yes, chiefly consumerism, and I find that to be a very questionable goal. As a means to an end it is surely fine, but I think that I am more inclined toward Buddhism, that you say, hey, it does make sense to realize your full potential as much as possible and then help other people. So you have to somehow realize your full potential or make the best of things. And if these became the main aims in a society, I think that other things would become secondary. Unfortunately I don’t have a clue as to how to put this into practice. Dictatorships don’t work; it always takes on a life of its own; waiting for people to become reasonable: I don’t know about that. A dictatorship of the wise along the lines of Aristotle or Socrates is a great model, but I doubt that wise people always remain wise in a dictatorship, um, but something like that, oh well. I also think that the world, in the long run, will become very religious. That’s because, I really believe it, um, because the goals, I mean look at our society! You only have to go out in the street and you think, my God, folks, is that enough? Running after things and then sitting there surrounded by things, um, maybe alone without a
mission, without a goal? And I believe that for most people, religious ideas and the system around them, I mean religious communities – working together, under one umbrella and with one aim, (...) – I think that people will be fed up and this religiously inspired community thing will be a lot stronger because this individualism – I think it will play itself out at some time. It will not remain satisfying forever.

Thomas characterizes the present society as one that appreciates superficiality and the accumulation of material things. He suggests Buddhism as an alternative form of societal life and connects it with a kind of moderate self-fulfillment: making the best of oneself while also acting in solidarity. For Thomas, Buddhism seems to correspond with a kind of appropriate self-development as a contribution to society – a moderate and social individualism somewhere between collectivism and egoism. His understanding of Buddhism reflects an immanent orientation for life, where the place of the individual within society is certain as are individual and societal aims. Thomas even discusses the necessity of securing this setting through a certain power. One may interpret Thomas’ prediction that the “world would become very religious” in this light. He sees his vision as contrasting with the present society and its material orientation, in which the individual is likely to lose sense of life and to become isolated, “sitting there surrounded by things (...) without a mission, without a goal.” At this point he stressed the “religious ideas” and the “systems around it,” i.e. the “religious communities.” He used these terms to describe a kind of community for work and life, where the community (Gemeinschaft) itself plays a key role. Thomas’ utopia has the character of an entire worldview (Weltanschauung) with one peculiarity. In the realms of a genuine religious tradition the interviewee creates a rather mundane or immanent ideological system, where aspects of the individual and the society complement each other and materialistic values lose importance in favor of personal values. Peculiarly this utopian model of society as community features work as one important value. This is remarkable since this aspect is indeed quite similar to parts of the ideology espoused in the GDR (Schmidt 2003). This kind of vision was also found in a secular form as the vision of society as a science-oriented community somewhat akin to the vision presented in the Star Trek series. In part, this could also be seen as referring to socialist ideology, because it covers some of its key values and thoughts: work as an important value and mainstay of the community, a community of researchers as a community for life, an ideology of scientific progress, and indeed a strictly
hierarchical order. Society can even be imagined as a community, in which the contrast between society and community would in fact be dissolved in full.

Some also raised ideas involving ‘great transcendences.’ In the cases that could be assigned to this type, religious-ideological constructions with utopian aspects and an orientation towards esoteric worldviews all played a role. These worldviews mostly mixed different ideas of various religions and ideologies regarding the meaning of life, contingencies, transcendences, etc., and brought together Christian, Eastern religious, and other mystical ideas. These views showed a peculiar tendency towards totalized worldviews, i.e. complete worldview systems. Here one could especially find what Niklas Luhmann called the duplication of reality (Realitätsverdopplung, Luhmann 2000, 63). In the case of a young woman with an explicitly communist family background, reality was doubled in different spheres such as art, intimate relationships, and society. Here the two motives ‘authenticity’ and ‘desire’ took the shape of romantic-utopian leitmotifs within her biography. In another case the interviewee referred to “another” world by mixing Christian ideas with ideas of reincarnation, astrological, and mystical theories. Both these cases were characterized by the inwardness and individualized character of these worldviews as well as the description of experiences of revelation.

It is interesting that in most of these cases religious content does not in fact play a key role; religion and religious ideas serve instead as a metaphor for describing alternatives to present society. This will be discussed in more detail in the final section of this paper, below.

**Religious vitalization between the generations**

Religious ideas and activities can play different roles within personal and family life stories. They can be important within biographical crises (the interviewees described for example “a kind of quest” or said “my belief is something that simply helps me”), and can be important within family development, but they can also entail a direct response to societal changes. In some cases they were able to provide stability within familial and societal disorder, secure one’s identity, and provide practical orientation.

In this section, I will focus on the dynamics between the generations. I was not only interested in the religious-ideological positions of the interviewees but in the way that these positions are connected with
the problems of the older generations. As mentioned above, younger
generations always have to deal with the biographical decisions of the
older generations. In a society of political and social change this
becomes all the more precarious. The political and social backgrounds
then change rapidly and are faced with clear challenges, through to
complete delegitimization. The younger generations have to find their
way to deal with both the older generations and the new society.
Religion and ideology is but one dimension within this matrix of gen-
erational dynamics.

References to other generations can be both positive and negative.
For Susan, her religious quest was connected to a very difficult process
of detachment from her family, which eventually resulted in complete
detachment. Her religious quest was a series of different alliances or
companionships that ended in joining her congregation, which could
then substitute in part for her lost family bonds.

Maybe, at a certain point, you look for someone [to talk to instead of
your] parents. But they were there and I was supported by them all the
time and I wasn’t isolated but the opposite: I was in good hands, you
know? And maybe this made me sure about my baptism and maybe
I was very sensitive at the time, but I really do believe that the singing,
which took place mainly in the realms of religion, well I was kind of
looking for salvation, I think. (…) and there is a lot of power when you
find out that there really are people, who (…) you feel close to and who
are your friends, that is, I find this very affirming and inspiring. It would
not work without this and now I am, well I am really, a little, I am really
fed up with the family issue a little.

Susan’s baptism coincided with her split with her family. She explicitly
presents her baptism as an important part of the process of detaching
from her mother. She found a group to belong in the church choir, and
her baptism may have served as a symbol of her membership in a new
community, indeed partly as a substitute for her family. The descrip-
tion of her family and her parents during the interview supports this
interpretation. Reflecting the finding above that religion can serve as
an ideal for the present, she accused her family of being “mercantile”
and contrasted it with her ideal community, the congregation, where
“other things matter.”

In the two other cases mentioned above with major transcendences,
their orientation toward the described esoteric worldviews provided
an opportunity to distinguish themselves from their rather atheistic
parents. In line with the inwardness and the individualized character
of these worldviews, they distinguished themselves by stressing the incommunicability of their experiences – and the supposition that the others could not follow or understand their experiences. In another example, one interviewee described his religion as a “true religion of experience,” contrasting it with his atheistic parents whom he described as “true materialists.” Choosing new companionships or describing new experiences from which the older generations are excluded thus becomes a way of detaching oneself from older generations. These examples illustrate how the young generation refers to the older generations in a negative way through their religious approaches.

Religious approaches can, however, also be used in a positive way to refer to the older generations and can in fact help to build up family bonds, as in the case of Julia and her grandmother’s mythical treasure trove. As mentioned previously, two matters were important in Julia’s approach to religion: the stories of her grandmother and the stories of the Bible as dramatic myths. These stories had different meanings for Julia and her grandmother but connected them nonetheless, as the following passage of the interview shows in particular:

…and this injustice was interesting to me; why this happened and then I read the Old Testament over and over (…) and then of course the connection to the family, that was very exciting (…) and my grandmother always talked a lot about the past – and it all added up – and how she lived as a kid in this village and that all was great for me. Like the old books, too, with the old print (…) and then religion came into the whole thing, the stories about the confirmation, how it happened, how it was in church, all the procedures and so on, that all was very interesting for me.

Religion plays a key role in the construction of family traditions. In this case, her family history consisted of “stories from the past” told by her grandmother about everyday life and religious practice, with religion thus arising in the form of stories from the past.

The connecting role of religion in this family becomes more evident when Julia describes her baptism. She decided to be baptized in summer 1990, when the Jugendweihe as the normal passage rite in the GDR all of a sudden was challenged. She chose to be baptized in the pilgrimage church her grandmother’s place of birth in Czechoslovakia, with the whole family joining them. And “just by accident,” as Julia put it, her atheistic mother and her brother were baptized there, too. The baptism of the others had not in fact been planned and nobody in the family could explain it or make it plausible later, neither in the family
interview nor in the interview with Julia alone. They explained it in part as a matter of language difficulties, since the procedure was in Czech; and they also made it seem passive, as if the mother and the brother just did not reject their baptism:

I now think that it was something that I wanted to experience, to experience myself. On the one hand, what all these stories are, and on the other hand, of course, to somehow be inside it myself in this whole, the whole world that was like a fairy tale world, and I wanted to somehow find out what it would be like to belong to it officially. But I never did because we never went to the church, it was only the baptism [laughs] when my brother was baptized, too, and my mother, who actually didn’t want to. […] it all went so fast] and everyone was baptized in a minute.

Julia described her motivation to be baptized as the wish “to belong to it officially.” But the baptism was not in fact a starting point for a more religious life or any religious practice at all, instead remaining an isolated episode within the history of Julia and her family. It did not take on any practical relevance, e.g. Julia did not join a congregation, nor did she or the other family members adopt Christian beliefs. They went to church once for Christmas, but again only once.

As a symbolic action, however, their collective baptism plays several different roles: It connects the family members to each other and it connects them to the religious heritage of the grandmother that was neglected during the GDR period and only regained plausibility after 1989. Thus, the act can be interpreted as the creation of familial unity by (re)constructing a (religious) family heritage.

At the same time, this also constitutes a kind of inverse socialization process, in which the youngest provide a new orientation for their elders. They may, for example, encourage their families to try going to church for Christmas or to test new religious offers.

These positive functions could not only be found in cases in which younger people refer to religious ideas but also to the secular sphere, reinterpreting, for example, elements of socialist societal theory, especially regarding the principles of social equality and justice. As the case of Julia showed, she interpreted both Bible stories and socialist myths as tales of justice.

**Religious vitalization within the context of religious-ideological change**

All the cases presented here have one feature in common: They all refer to religion or ideology as being detached from a specific religion or
ideology. Religious appeals are deprived of their religious content and symbols, just as the fragments of socialist ideology are deprived of their ideological content and political implications.

In this way, numerous ideas and principles are discrete but can therefore be used by different generations. This process especially allows the younger generation to use them against the background of the new society, while modernizing their religious and ideological heritage at the same time. The appeal to the religious or ideological interpretations of the older generations is not therefore only a matter of adopting or rejecting old traditions or values, but indeed entails a very specific reinterpretation and recombination connected with the new societal environment.

Especially the reference to community (Gemeinschaft), the opposition of the ‘material’ and the ‘ideal’ and the problem of authenticity all play a key role in the biographical material reviewed.

The ideal of ‘community’ characteristically provides an opportunity to refer to older generations in a positive way. All three family generations can refer to this ideal, while still filling it with slightly different meanings. The myth of ‘community’ seems to be an answer to the perception of societal decay, accompanied with a sense of a loss of ‘community’ in the aftermath of the political changes. Younger people often refer to different societal utopias, mixing, for example, religious ideas with science fiction, all mostly combined with a critique of capitalism. This also intermixes with their parents’ stories of social equality in the GDR, positive group experiences, and a narrative of a less stressful way of living, in which money and careers play a diminished role. What would seem to be a legacy of socialism is re-interpreted as a critique of today’s society and market system with all its mechanisms.

The opposition of ‘materialistic’ and ‘ideal’ worlds is of particular interest: For the younger generation, religion comes into play in terms of unspecific religious ideas and a critical intention: as the ‘ideal’ in contrast to the ‘material’ world, as the ‘other’ in opposition to the world. When Thomas predicted the increase of religion in society he did not necessarily mean an increase of any particular religion or belief but rather a change in societal values. Religion was used as a metaphor for alternatives to the perception of a materialistic society. In this way religion develops into a screen for the projection of images of a better

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3 ‘Material’ both in the sense of capitalistic or egoistic (materialistic) and in the (esp. philosophical) meaning of ‘matter’ as an opposite to ‘ideal’.
world and life. Taking these findings into account, religious vitalization or desecularization could be imagined as a shift of the conflictive framework mentioned at the beginning of the paper: While, for the parents of the younger generation, this conflict was one between politics and religion at the three mentioned levels (membership [church vs. party], worldview [science vs. religion], and ethics [Christian vs. Marxist]), this conflict is no longer relevant to younger people, especially the contrast between science and religion and in terms of worldview.

Polar tensions do, however, remain, now mostly in terms of a dichotomy between ‘material’ or ‘materialistic’ and ‘ideal’ worlds, which is, in the end, in fact a truely religious opposition. As the examples showed, however, this can also be articulated in a secular manner by referring to elements of socialist-utopian constructions. Both religious ideas and fragments of socialist utopian thought are thus now used to understand and evaluate life in today’s society, mostly in a critical way. It is in this point that the generations either agree or differ. In this way, references to religious and ideological heritage become both a means of generational reference and an engine of generational change. Religion and ideology become the problem itself, where the differing opinions of the generations meet. The approach of the younger generation to religious and ideological interpretations of the older generations consists in very specific and willful reinterpretations and recombinations that rely in part on the structure of their families and on societal plausibility.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE REHABILITATION OF EX-OFFENDERS IN EASTERN GERMANY: A RELIGIOUS-SECULAR CONFIGURATION

Irene Becci

INTRODUCTION

Seemingly, an East German society has emerged after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR hereafter). This society is not a homogeneous entity, nor do any clear-cut boundaries separate it from its eastern European and West German neighbors. A couple of features do, however, seem to distinguish it from them. Beyond all the clichés about East Germans being *jammerossi* – a term referring to nostalgic Easterners complaining constantly about their lost living standards – or being *ostalgisch* – there is a body of serious literature arguing in favor of such a distinction. Authors who grew up in the GDR (Pollack et al. 2000; Engler 2002; Kollmorgen 2005), emphasize that the shared experience of the radical transformation of their social, political, economic, and cultural institutions has given East Germans a distinct perspective on the world. It is hence not so much a question of substantial differences in identity, values, or practices but one of perspective on these identities, values, and practices.

After the fall of communism, the financial and organizational input to change came from the West, but East Germans participated in this rebuilding and appropriated the new institutions from their own perspective, and – importantly – from below since the leading positions were taken mostly by West-Germans. The rapidity of these institutional changes contrasted strongly with the slow motion of everyday interactions in East Germany. Only now, twenty years later, some configurations can be identified.

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1 I use in this text on purpose the expression “East Germany” in capital letter to make clear that I do not refer to a geographical area located in the eastern part of Germany, but that I would like to remain close to the German expression *Ostdeutschland*, that is, the former GDR. In this text “East Germans” means hence former GDR citizens.
Religious institutions also underwent major transformations and religion as such was given a new location in society. The religious communities and actors reacted in different ways to the new situation so that the picture that emerges today is a very variegated one. In this essay I shall consider the changes more closely that occurred in one particular field into which religion started to play a new role after the end of the GDR: the rehabilitation of ex-offenders. I shall take the 1980s as a chronological point of departure and follow the transformation through today. This is the time lap often discussed by those most involved in the field of ex-offender rehabilitation.

In a first step, I will look back upon the socialist period and at the changes that the Wende introduced in the realms of religion and ex-offender rehabilitation. Secondly, I will present some of the empirical cases studied in my fieldwork: I will try to point to certain similarities between Protestant, Catholic, and secular East German actors in the field of social assistance for ex-offenders as a result of a precise historical process in which not only the secular has produced the religious (Asad 2003) but also the other way round. If confronted to West German actors and to their secular-religious configuration, however, some differences will become visible.

**Religion and offenders in a socialist society**

Socialism had its own view of the role of religion with regard to offenders. The GDR had put the prison department under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior which implied that “prisons were run on a police state model” (Arnold 1995, 83). Conditions there were very rough and work was compulsory. As a consequence, the internal regulations were the work of the Minister of the Interior and the chief of the police. While no pastoral care at all was admitted to youth prisons, military prisons, and internment camps, there was in fact a legal basis for it in normal prisons.²

According to the 1977 Prison Act, prisoners who were members of a church were granted, on demand, freedom of religious activities. The fact that the church was recognized by the state as an institution with a territorial religious domain was indeed very significant for the

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² The spiritual care offered in the framework of chaplaincy in the GDR was primarily Protestant and Catholic.
realization of their prison chaplaincy. The modalities and the general spirit behind the regulations, were, however, very restrictive. As we know, in terms of membership figures, the GDR era was devastating for the churches. By the time the Berlin Wall came down, not more than 30 percent of the East German population belonged to any Christian church at all, down from over 90 percent in 1949 (Pollack and Pickel 2000, 9).

The number of prisoners requesting religious care could thus never be very high, which was an additional obstacle to holding religious services. Internal prison rules indeed provided that “religious services were to be allowed only if there were enough prisoners” (Arnold 1995, 84). Clearly, in the spirit of the socialist model, religion had nothing to do with the ‘educational goal’ of prisons or indeed with any general plan for society as a whole. Work, commitment to the party line, order, discipline, and control were top priorities in both realms. In prisons, the largest rooms, traditionally dedicated to religious services, were instead used to show propaganda films.

In order to control the chaplains who worked in the GDR prisons more closely, the government reduced their number drastically to a few, absolutely loyal pastors: the first full-time prison chaplain in the GDR was a pastor who had worked for the central secretary of the Socialist Unity Party (SED). When he escaped from the GDR in the 1950s, other chaplains were fired until only one pastor remained, who was a strong party loyalist and who had received a bronze medal for his work for the state. The activities done under the heading of the chaplaincy were strongly restricted and monitored. Chaplains were not allowed to relate what the inmates told them to any other person inside or outside of prison nor could they accept any written notes from prisoners or transmit them to any other person inside or outside of prison. Through Caritas, the Catholic Church was able to provide some pastoral care to inmates and to offer support to the relatives of imprisoned persons (Kösters 2001; Pilousek 2003).

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3 He was supposed to provide spiritual care to all prisoners in the GDR, of which there were about 30,000 in the 1980s. He wrote a very controversial book remaining very elusive on a lot of issues that could provide hints about his collaboration with the Stasi (Giebeler 1992).

4 Caritas was started in 1897 in Germany as an umbrella confederation of Roman Catholic relief, development, and social service organizations, which is now active worldwide and has become an indispensable partner for state actors in the provision of social care.
Locally, some prison wardens allowed chaplains to enter prisons in order to provide spiritual support, not as official ministers, however, but as visitors. This allowed many chaplains to enact strategies of resistance to help inmates on a personal level. Inmates identified the official chaplains as collaborators with state security while those there informally were considered as deserving of particular trust, and were entrusted with confidential information. It was known that some clergy members worked for the state security but, as Ramet writes, “collaboration with Stasi did not undermine the Church’s opposition activity: on the contrary, it may even have made that opposition possible” (1998, 76).

During their detention, prisoners were reeducated to respect socialist values through work, discipline, and “ideological training.” As a result of this model, “political-ideologically trained prisoners would commit no new offences” (Arnold 1995, 85). Once released, they could thus simply be put back into the position they previously occupied in society. The Reintegration Act promoted far-reaching measures for the resocialisation of ex-inmates, revolving around working and housing in particular. Theoretically, released prisoners were to be integrated “into the work collective in which the offender had been working before imprisonment” and local government authorities were “responsible for providing accommodation for released prisoners” (Arnold 1995, 86). The idea behind these measures was that society as a whole was responsible for the reintegration of ex-prisoners. In practice, however, the picture was not as rosy. Workers’ collectives sometimes refused to cooperate with ex-inmates, and the “flats offered were frequently below the standards of decent human accommodation” (ibid.). The situation of ex-prisoners was hence far from being unproblematic and religious actors could not be very helpful in this context as they themselves experienced difficulties in terms of their social integration and could provide neither work nor housing.

The general orientation of the GDR government was clearly atheistic. Its relationship with churches and religious communities would, however, vary from one region to another, from one denomination to another, and change over time and according to the various leaders who were in place (both in the party and in the church). During the late 1980s, a movement of church-based opposition to the government developed in a large number of political fields: international politics (peace, NATO, civil service), ecological concerns (pollution, nuclear energy), gender issues (abortion, homosexuality), human rights
(political prisoners, freedom of speech and movement), and others.\(^5\) Increasingly, subgroups such as punks, anarchists, and hippies were attracted to churches and engaged in discussions and confrontations with Protestants and other Christians. During these actions, the issue of prisoners’ rights would arise in relation to the denunciation of political imprisonment.\(^6\) Many activists faced the continual risk of being imprisoned, especially when the government was put under pressure by the ascendance of perestroika and glasnost in the Soviet Union and by the increasing number of people escaping to the West. In September 1987, for instance, Berlin’s Zion Church organized the country’s first unofficial peace march (Hartley 1994). Two months later, state security police raided the library of the church, confiscating copying machines, various publications and materials, and arresting twenty-one. The state then interrupted its financial support to churches, as protests took place throughout the GDR. This event severely disappointed the population, in particular because it happened when hopes for an internal political liberalization and an external political openness were growing. The Luther quincentenary celebrations in 1983 for instance, had appeared as a moment of cooperation between the church – or at least some parts of it – and state. In fact, the regime’s aim was focused more on the rehabilitation of giants of German history. In 1988 the state introduced a new censorship campaign and blocked the publication of several Protestant church newspapers. During these years, pastors played a significant role as mediators in conflicts with the government (Halbrock 2002). The activists, however, never really questioned the prison system as such. Among the religious actors, the Protestant churches were the most deeply involved in secular politics and work toward mediation and finding a middle ground. The Catholic Church, by contrast, remained more abstinent politically.\(^7\) Without going into

\(^5\) Whereas the churches in the West had already developed similar programs in the aftermath of May 1968, they never went as far in the secular expressions of these political concerns as Eastern parishes did.


\(^7\) I will leave out less known religious minorities which had – despite the public recognition obtained in 1973 – a much more confrontational relationship to the GDR state. There were many small religious communities. In 1988 there were 28,000 Methodists, the Russian Orthodox-Church had maintained an incongruous
detail, we can note that a distinction has to be made between the two churches. Differences can also be recognized in how they reorganized their involvement in ex-offender rehabilitation following the changes of 1989.

**Religion as a resource for offender rehabilitation in post-socialist Germany**

The end of the GDR completely changed the terms of reintegration for ex-offenders and their relation to religious institutions and actors. Following the West German social model, religion was reestablished at different levels of society. In the prisons, both prisoners and chaplains received much broader rights to exercise religious freedom. Religion is now in fact viewed as being able to contribute well to rehabilitation (Eick-Wildgans 1993, 65). The notions of ‘crimes’ and ‘prisoners’ have also changed strongly since the fall of socialism: political crimes and prisoners have disappeared – at least in the sense as understood by the dissidents of the time⁸ – while drug-related offences, for instance, have increased. Prisons are now under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice. In some regards, the reasons have disappeared that originally brought protesters to become active with regard to prisons. The Wende was associated with the long awaited opportunity to democratize the justice system.⁹ As Förster writes, the Wende “opened the doors of the prisons, and for the first time made imprisonment a little more transparent to the public, a topic which was taboo during the GDR was publicly discussed” (1996, 112).

A former inmate, now in his early forties, whom I interviewed in September 2006 while he was attending an arts workshop organized by a secular rehabilitation program in East Berlin, experienced this change firsthand. He told me that he had been imprisoned in spring of 1989

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⁸ According to the SED’s official information there were no political prisoners in the GDR prisons. Cf. Rüddenklau 1992.

⁹ The prisons were almost emptied (by October 1990, the percentage of imprisoned persons was one third of its counterpart in the West) but they filled up again within only a couple of months.
for murder and had received a sentence of more than 15 years. His sentence was reconsidered after the Wende and he was “already” released in 2000 and found an apartment thanks to the housing program of a secular rehabilitation program, the Freie Hilfe Berlin, which I will describe in greater detail later. For years, he had been an alcoholic and had already attended a Christian rehabilitation program during the GDR era, where he started being attracted to religious questions despite his strongly atheistic family background: his father “was in the Party,” as he worded it.

After the trial, he was very afraid of prison since the one he was to go to had had a terrible reputation as a place of violence and despair. But, as he expressed it, “then the Wende [came], and a lot of aid organizations entered the picture.” The religious experience in prison also changed immensely:

Before the Wende, the religious services always took place under surveillance, there were always officers, it was not as open as after the Wende. We always had the impression we were watched – it was also common to say: “You only go to the religious service in order to receive some sort of gifts.” (…) Actually, I had mentally put an end [to my life] when I was imprisoned: “Either I survive the time or not.” If the Wende hadn’t happened, I would have remained in [prison X] for fifteen years: nobody knows if I would have survived that time.

For him, the Wende had clearly saved his life. To open prisons to the public also entailed that the public would now start to deal with the problems connected to imprisonment. The population, however, showed little acceptance for the new view of rehabilitation (Förster 1996), according to which religion was an important resource for rehabilitation, alongside instruction and work.

Expectations of the churches’ public role changed during and after unification (Thériault 2004). Institutionally speaking, the Christian churches benefited immediately from the collapse of communism: pressures on them were removed, several Christian holy days were restored as state holidays, and numerous theologians took leading positions in the new state structures (Vögele 1994). In the constitutions of the new federal states, the link between church and state was transformed into one of friendly collaboration, which entailed the almost total adoption of the Western model.10 Today, both major

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10 Von Mangoldt’s (1997) study of the constitutions of the new East German federal states shows that this collaboration is most clearly affirmed in Saxony. All the same, the distance to churches is clearer in the other federal states, most of all in Brandenburg.
churches, as well as certain Orthodox ones, are bodies defined by public law (Neumann 2001).

These changes had an impact upon the relation of civil activists to the churches. Once the wall had been torn down, numerous members of peace and environmental groups, who had used the church for their meetings and political mobilization, abandoned all of their religious involvement. The more plausible form of involvement was then political, since the churches were no longer positioned in opposition to the state, nor were they any longer the only places available for civil and political activism. From a demographical perspective, the percentage of elderly people was extremely high among church members and their educational level was below the average for the overall population. Neither participation nor membership rates increased as was the case in other eastern European countries after the fall of communism.\textsuperscript{11}

Those activists who had a closer link to the church, split into an institutional part (e.g., Caritas for Catholics, and Diakonie for Protestants,\textsuperscript{12} ecological groups and fair-trade shops) and a more underground wing (e.g., the anti-fascist and anti-militarist Kirche von Unten, an alternative place for political groups, punk concerts, an open kitchen, debates, etc. in East Berlin\textsuperscript{13}). The new place of religion in eastern German society became clear when the Round Tables disappeared around 1993, at the latest. While churches received remarkable juridical and political recognition (including some financial support) from the state, the majority of the population were no longer members of any church. Churches were, however, expected to participate in public and political life but also to keep away from state power.

The German constitution grants church-related organizations a privileged status to shape and implement welfare and social service

\textsuperscript{11} Beckley, Chalfant, and Johnson’s qualitative study on pastors reports that lay participation had increased since unification, but not as much as pastors had expected. The pastors interviewed expressed their feeling of being relegated to second-class citizenship in the reunited church and feared that the measures taken in having to accommodate a hostile state were not adequately appreciated by their church counterparts in the former FRG. (Beckley, Chalfant and Johnson 1994).

\textsuperscript{12} Diakonie refers to the organized Protestant social welfare provision that started as ‘internal mission’ in Germany in 1848. It has now become one of the six major organizations for social care in Germany. As for Caritas, its activity was reduced but not discontinued during the GDR (Bäcker et al. 2000).

provisions. As had been the case in West Germany, the principle of subsidiarity became the cornerstone of the welfare system (Metzler 2003, 196–197). This principle is rooted in Christian social doctrine and its introduction meant that the entire social organization around welfare provisions was turned upside-down and that a third sector had to be molded by an almost inexistent civil society. While the rehabilitation of ex-offenders was organized in a top-down and centralized way during socialism, the post-unification principle called for the social forces at the lowest possible level to carry out these social services. East German society had, however, had almost no formally constituted associations at this particular level – so the groups emerging out of the civil movements, the churches, and Caritas found themselves pushed to take on major initiatives. Not only the main churches were put in a privileged position through the introduction of this principle, but smaller Christian churches and organizations that offered social services suddenly enjoyed a far more valued stance in society as well. Moreover, the subsidiarity principle clearly encouraged plurality so that the 1990s saw a veritable blossoming of the third sector (cf. Anheier and Priller 1991). As Anheier, Priller, and Zimmer point out, this transformation was, however, loaded with tension and criticism. Critical voices argued that the new welfare associations had received extensive public funding for their intervention in the East but continued to be based in the West. Hence, East Germans do “not regard these institutions as independent nonprofit organizations, but as public or

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14 Cf. also article 15 and 32 of the Unification Treaty, and §10 of the Bundessozialhilfegesetz, the federal law on social help.
15 In Germany, the Subsidiaritätsprinzip (subsidiarity principle) means “the distribution of public tasks on different juridical actors”, such as associations and other institutions (Pirson 1998, 70). As long as smaller, local organizations are able to provide certain services they should do so, while higher situated institutions only intervene when their competences or structures are no longer sufficient. Since the Weimar Republic, the different associations providing such services are grouped into larger units, and called Spitzenverbände. In West Germany, six of them have played a dominant role since the 1970s in the realm of social help and have professionalized their organizational structures, increasingly resembling state institutions. As a parallel to these associations, ‘free’, private initiatives are also organized.
16 The philosophical background of the principle of subsidiarity as a social theory found in Aquinas’ doctrine of the ‘bonum commune’, the common good; individuals and smaller communities should operate at the service of the common good and therefore receive ample powers. John Calvin also referred to this idea in his social doctrine. Not until 1931, however, was the principle formulated in an explicit way in an encyclical letter of the Catholic Church (Pirson 1998, 70).
quasi-public institutions... Furthermore, the two biggest welfare associations – Diakonie and Caritas – are church-affiliated institutions.... Critics see the public support for Diakonie and Caritas in East Germany as a peaceful colonization in an effort to re-Christianize a secular society” (Anheier, Priller, and Zimmer 2001, 148).

If associations fulfill certain criteria provided by a legal framework (such as not discriminating on the basis of religious adherence or targeting a precise, legally defined category of persons, etc.) and collaborate with the state administration (in terms of economic and political transparency, etc.), they receive public funding – which generally entails being linked to one of the major associations. Hence, the relation between the different providers of social help to ex-offenders in East Germany should be seen as much in terms of competition as of collaboration.

Thus, while religious institutions moved into the East with strong organizational support from the West, civil activists contributed immensely to shaping the new fields of social help from below, with a close knowledge of the needs of their addressees. As a result, the meeting of religious and secular actors was intermingled with East-West issues, that is, issues of unbalanced power relations. Today, a certain plurality indeed remains with regard to the organization of ex-offender rehabilitation.

**Offender Rehabilitation Programs in Eastern Germany**

During my year of fieldwork in the states of Berlin, Brandenburg, and Saxony-Anhalt17 I inquired into various secular and religious associations that offered programs of rehabilitation to ex-offenders. In the remaining pages, I shall propose a panorama of specific religious-secular configurations that emerged in the field of ex-offender rehabilitation. This field now includes state institutions and secular non-governmental associations, but also church-related associations and institutions. Some were created anew after unification either by politically active East Germans (partly in connection with the initiatives of the Round Tables) or by newly arrived West German actors; others are part of expanded West German institutions (e.g. the

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17 As a post-doctoral project from 2006 to 2009 at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale, Germany.
Universal-Stiftung and Protestant social welfare organizations such as Stadtmission). Both types of programs – independently initiated or transferred – can be either secular or religious.

Among the numerous programs providing help in the field of offender rehabilitation in Germany, eight are located in Berlin and ten in Brandenburg,18 of which slightly more than a quarter were initiated and carried out by religious organizations. The religious institutions in the area are all Christian-oriented.19 Most Protestant, Catholic, and other Christian institutions now active in the field of rehabilitation receive public recognition and funding. As a consequence of the new state-church link and the new organization of the welfare system in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, the established religions are now considered to be important partners by state administrations when it comes to rehabilitating ex-convicts (Hildemann 2004). For example, usually Christian (Protestant and Catholic) support centres (Caritas, Diakonie, Stadtmission, Schwarzes Kreuz, etc.) are listed systematically in prison newspapers, brochures, and on websites concerned with offender rehabilitation (issued by state institutions, secular and religious non-governmental organizations20), while one very rarely finds institutions led by other religious communities.21

I will, in the following, distinguish secular providers of social assistance in the field of ex-offender rehabilitation from those that are anchored in the Protestant or Roman Catholic churches. This will reveal a certain similarity between the secular support of ex-offenders – including its self-understanding – and some East German

18 According to the Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft für Straffälligenhilfe e.V. (bag), the federal umbrella agency for offender rehabilitation, there are more than 300 organizations active in the field throughout Germany. About a quarter of them are in East Germany. Of those located in East Germany, another quarter has a religious orientation of some kind. In comparison, this rate is much higher in Bavaria, while it is lower in Baden-Württemberg. I refer to the following sources: my own research data, including data collected at a federal Caritas meeting, the documents produced by the Freie Hilfe Berlin e.V. and socialnet website, http://socialnet.de/ (accessed in April 2009).

19 I count here those associations and programs exclusively active in the field of ex-offender rehabilitation.

20 The “Ratgeber für Inhaftierte, Haftentlassene und deren Angehörige” (guide for inmates, former inmates, and their families) currently published by the Arbeiterwohlfahrt Kreisverband Chemnitz und Umgebung (Worker Welfare Association for Chemnitz and Surroundings) advertises, for instance, Missionarinnen der Nächstenliebe (Missionaries of Charity) and Caritas.

21 The website http://www.bagStraffaeligentinderhilfe.de/bereich3_2 names the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (accessed in April 2009).
denominational actors. This similarity, I argue, is the result of a secularized understanding of the religious actors’ relation to the postsocialist society.

Protestant institutional support to ex-offenders

Ex-offender rehabilitation in East Germany is no longer a priority in the grassroots activism of the Protestant churches, after being strongly present before the Wende. All the important figures who were imprisoned for political reasons in the GDR, among whom one could also find a large number of theologians and individuals who were active in church-related oppositional groups, and who became very active in their fight against imprisonment around the time of the Wende, no longer seem to be active in debates on prison conditions.

As church structures have been moved closer to the state, they have become politically less independent but probably also more influential. One good example of this is the Berlin Protestant social welfare center – Berliner Stadtmission 22 – located close to Berlin’s main railway station in an area where the wall used to separate the Mitte and Moabit neighborhoods, only half a kilometer from one of West Berlin’s largest prisons. In 2001, a program entitled Drinnen und Draußen (inside and outside) was initiated at the center, providing support to inmates who are close to their release (within two years) and prepares their release by finding them housing, discussing training opportunities, mediating in conflicts with their partners, etc. The ex-inmates continue to receive support for a while once outside prison as well. There is no program that addresses East German ex-inmates in particular, who account for about 200 of their “clients” each year. I met different ex-convicts when participating in the activities of this program, but none was from East Germany, nor were many of the employees of the program. At the celebration of the start of the program in a Berlin prison in October 2006, I was able to observe how close the program was to state institutions. The ministers and wardens on hand all expressed their gratitude for the existence of the program and the trust they placed in it. The program placed great emphasis on its role in conveying values to ex-offenders, most prominently including the values of family and responsibility. Although the program struggled to receive enough funding, it was able

22 This type of Protestant support organization for ex-offenders also exist in Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt.
to rely on its strong ties to the Protestant Church through which it gained publicity as a denominational actor.

The often mentioned power of the Protestant churches in the provision of social care in East Germany has to be reconsidered in the case of ex-offender rehabilitation. The reason lies in the fact that many East German Protestant actors see themselves better placed in secular organizations. I will provide an explanation for this below. I argue that this shift of religion into the secular world is a typical Protestant pattern in East Germany.

The secular coming out of the churches

The secular institutions in the field of ex-offender rehabilitation are more numerous in East Germany. Some were created in West Berlin and are now present throughout the whole city and to some extent in Brandenburg, such as the Universal-Stiftung which is mainly concerned with vocational training. It is a huge foundation that was created by the city of Berlin in 1957 upon the initiative of Helmut Ziegner, a politically and socially committed actor, and which employs about 220 persons today. In 1996 it expanded its programs to the East where it had to deal with skeptical attitudes from all sides, as the person in charge of the East German programs asserted in a conversation in 2007. The Wende offered the chance to enter the East for the foundation, without coming up with a new rehabilitation concept there. Associations that emerged from the Wende, however, continue to exist as well, two of which I will now mention, one located in Saxony-Anhalt, and one in East Berlin.

In Summer 2006, I contacted the head of the Landesverband für Straftägigen- und Bewährungshilfe Sachsen-Anhalt, a state-wide network of support associations for offender rehabilitation.23 My question about the role of religion in the field of offender rehabilitation almost shocked her: “We are against it because we want people to take on their own responsibility.” After a moment, however, she advised me to call a pastor who had played a leading role in an ecumenical working group created in 1990 for the Magdeburg prison, which included socially active citizens, prison wardens, and church people. The pastor invited
me to join him for the opening of a photo exhibition in the Magdeburg prison and, after the ceremony, introduced me to a former prison warden of the Magdeburg prison and social workers at today’s support center for released prisoners. We all sat down around a table at the center, and the pastor told the story of how the local ex-inmate support association was formed. He remembered:

Shortly before unification, the local Magdeburg association for offender rehabilitation was founded and shortly afterwards the regional association (…) The church, because it was not integrated into the socialist state, was the first contact for the independent initiatives. When the local association was created, there were only church people there: from the Protestant social welfare network, Caritas (…) Those active in the initiatives from the West contacted the church first. So the two associations were mostly founded by church people. This, however, changed right away because we thought the church should not remain in this position, but that they are free (…) the church can only help with the birth, so that autonomous associations and initiatives can develop (…) and the local association changed very quickly in that way. The church people joined other initiatives instead – Caritas, the Protestant social welfare organization Diakonie.

The church actors considered themselves to be “a help with the birth” who would leave once the new structures were born. During this discussion, the democratic commitment of the East German religious actors became very clear. The pastor underlined, for instance, that for him the first article of the constitution, “Human dignity is inviolable,” is a fundamental value that can be justified theologically. According to him, and this is the basis of his motivation to care for prisoners:

Each person deserves to be loved, even if he is the lowest dog that has to be incarcerated for life. But – somewhere, somehow – every person has a value. And this is crucial for me, the value that took on its concrete character through God becoming a person.

By putting forward such values as comprehension, forgiveness, and humanity, he showed his universal concern for the good of society as a whole. According to the pastor, the church’s task is to contribute to the building of a “free society with a democratic state, where the values we find important are preserved.” A non-denominational social worker at the table enthusiastically reacted to this remark: “When I hear such a statement, I feel so close to church!”

The pastor here, and the reaction of the social worker to an even greater extent, go far to exemplify the widespread East German understanding of the place and role of the Protestant churches in
society: The churches have to be morally upstanding but independent and need to keep a critical distance to the state in order to allow for the democratic functioning of the secular society. While the discrete and modest presence of religion in the public sphere seems to be accepted, at a personal level, it remains almost a taboo. The social worker also sitting at the table in Magdeburg insisted on the fact that she “never considered it worth finding out” what the religious affiliation or beliefs of others are: “I am a child of the GDR… I decide my relation to the church for myself… religious affiliation adherence has no importance at work for me… It is also okay that church people have left our organization.”

If church people left secular organizations once they were in place, the opposite occurred as well: secular persons who were active under the umbrella of the churches around the time of the Wende began to leave the churches and launch initiatives on their own. The Freie Hilfe Berlin e.V. (FHB hereafter) has been built on this kind of experience. It is the most active and best known association in East Berlin (its posters and advertisements cannot be overlooked by visitors to prison waiting rooms or in prison-related magazines, etc.) and offers a clear territorial and historical reference to East Germany. As a matter of fact, not only is it located in East Berlin, it also originated as a product of the Wende initiatives. It was created in the early 1990s specifically for those who, having grown up in the GDR and now being released from prison, did not feel comfortable going to institutions that they considered to be “Western.”

In the 1990s, the FHB quickly developed into one of the main associations in Berlin offering a wide spectrum of rehabilitation programs to convicts and former inmates. It organizes different rehabilitation programs, focusing on working, computing, arts, housing, and drug rehabilitation. Some are specifically geared toward migrants, and others toward women or youth, etc. In general the support is of a very pragmatic nature while issues

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24 Interestingly, the only exception for her is when she has to deal with Muslims as she said: “I know of course, when it comes to Muslims, it is no longer a minor manner, when we need to solve basic problems, or problems related to marriage etc., religion cannot be left out, I know that well.”

25 Cf. Freie Hilfe Berlin 2000. Westerners agree on this division of the addressees. When talking to a western representative of the Protestant Church one day in Berlin, I told him that I was following a reintegration program of the FHB. He then commented that I probably worked with skinheads – as in his opinion East German inmates were primarily Nazi skinheads.
of values are not moved to the forefront. The association is known by prisoners and their families through its large advertisement. A quote from the brochure the FHB edited for their 10th anniversary illustrates this affirmation:

The birth of the FREIE HILFE BERLIN association came about in the middle of 1990, in the oft remembered time of the Wende. In a variety of different places, activists met at round tables, in forums, groups, and discussions, and lobbied for the organization of a new type of assistance and support for offender rehabilitation that would, however, also take their previous experience into account. In this mixture of feelings and perspectives it was not easy to create something new that had not previously been possible, and to embed it into strong existing structures that had long since been challenged, something which would reflect a meaningful and feasible conception of a need-oriented association for the support of offender rehabilitation (...). In this context, the people of the Pankow and Prenzlauer Berg districts who became involved more or less by chance joined together to found a non-governmental organization to support the rehabilitation of ex-convicts. Metaphorically speaking, this is how the sperm fertilized the egg…. (Freie Hilfe Berlin 2000, 4).

From this quote, we can easily draw a connection to the metaphor of the “help to birth” mentioned by the Magdeburg pastor earlier. Both this secular recollection and the Protestant one use creation metaphors when referring to the Wende. The people at FHB continue to participate actively in public debates today, animated by the spirit of the ‘Round Tables,’ that is, with the aim of improving the level of political participation in civil society. During my year of observing the FHB rehabilitation program, I could recognize in their practice what the social worker in Magdeburg meant about religion as being “not worth knowing.” The only time a pastor was called was for the burial of one rehabilitant who had passed away. The social workers felt that the presence of a pastor at the funeral was necessary for them to express their human concern, although the client never had any contact to this particular pastor or indeed to any church. This idea of human dignity was similar to that articulated by the Magdeburg pastor.

In spite of the program’s clear secular and pragmatic orientation, Christmas and Easter were still celebrated as special occasions there, with a good meal and presents for everybody. However, no explicit

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26 For instance at the debates on “The Prison as a Place of Violence?” in the café of the newspaper Die Tageszeitung in Berlin on November 13, 2007.
reference was made to the Christian background or message of the festivities.

*Caritas: change and continuity*

The main Catholic actor in the field of offender rehabilitation is the *Caritas* association. As mentioned above, *Caritas* already existed during the socialist era and by the time the GDR collapsed it became clear that the East German *Caritas* had transformed into something “completely different”27 than it was in West Germany, as a *Caritas* employee expressed it when I interviewed him in Berlin in January 2007: “*Caritas* has just emerged here out of the parishes,” much more than was the case in the West. The parish was indeed the organizational anchor of *Caritas* during the GDR since it would have been impossible to organize it as an official association at the time (Pilvousek 2003, 54). In this socialist environment, *Caritas* allowed Catholics to “invoke Christian charity without speaking” (Pilvousek 2003, 59), that is, without using a religious vocabulary. This understanding of their role as providers of social assistance would continue on after the *Wende*, as the interviewed *Caritas* employee explained, “the structure came from the West but many things, our understanding of our work or of the ‘provision of services’ as they [the westerners] say, to understand how I do what I do, this is still strongly rooted in the East.” In this way, he expressed how East German Catholics had appropriated western structures.

The employees of the *Caritas* offender rehabilitation program in East Germany know each other well and meet on a regular basis. One of the most important of these centers is located in the town of Frankfurt (Oder) in Brandenburg. Most of the social workers involved in the programs organized by the office got to know each other during their studies in social work at the Catholic University for Applied Sciences which was founded in Berlin immediately upon unification.

Then, after the *Wende* I had the opportunity – I was always interested in it but didn't have the necessary diploma, since I had not taken part in the *Jugendweihe* [socialist youth ritual] – (…) to attend a Catholic school. It was again about questioning values – I find that important – and broadening of my point of view. Today, I still rely on what I experienced there (…). After the *Wende*, in my first semester, people all took the opportunity

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27 This and the following quotes are taken from the verbatim transcription of the interview. They have all been translated by the author.
again – we were questioning what the professors from the West presented not only in terms of knowledge but also in terms of values. We were all standing in the middle of our lives and we had all experienced the Wende in such a conscious way that we were questioning a lot of things. It really was a time of uprising, it was really great as we tried so hard to contribute to shaping our school. I was just talking about that recently, we still make use of the contacts and the experience of the time.

For these social workers, their school remains a ‘point of identification’, and they realize that they were deeply influenced by their experience there. In 2006, the office celebrated its 10th anniversary by organizing a gathering at the center, a multi-level building that includes offices, a chapel, a nursery, and a large church. Prison wardens, representatives of the Protestant church, and local political officials were invited, and a local theatre company performed a play related to imprisonment. The officials spoke and praised Caritas’ work in the area: the presence of Caritas there, one official said, is “a sign that Frankfurt’s prisons are humane ones.” On various occasions – during the celebration but also when I met those involved in other contexts – the word humanity and Christianity were used in an interchangeable way.

The posters on the walls revealed the history of the office by showing a continuity from the 1970s, when the first Caritas assistance program for released prisoners in Frankfurt was created, through to today. Until the end of the GDR, the few people active in the organization kept in continual contact with the inmates and with the priests who were allowed to visit them. After 1989, however, the activities depicted on the posters multiplied visibly: housing programs, volunteer training, debts mediation, schools presentations, photo exhibitions, etc. In 1990, the organization was part of a Ministry of Justice commission charged with reorganizing the prison system. In 1996, an office (with 3 employees) assisting released persons with housing was opened and has since expanded throughout the state of Brandenburg. It was interesting to see how the office displayed a continuity of activities from the GDR period onward including its reopening in 1996. Continuity was often stressed between the socialist past and today to show their experience and justify their current competence. In May 2007, I attended the opening of a photo exhibition at Frankfurt’s Marienkirche. With the support of Caritas, a photographer had worked with inmates for months and their pictures were now exhibited in the church. Local officials and ministers were on hand and while the latter praised the collaboration with churches when it comes to offender rehabilitation,
the former mentioned the particular predisposition that East Germans had with regard to walls. The aim of exhibiting photographs that prisoners took in prison was, according to him, to show publicly what happens “behind the walls. We of the GDR,” he continued, “we all have experience with walls and know how important that is.”

For Catholics active in Caritas, the Wende period seems to have been a less traumatic and indeed rather invigorating experience. After the difficulties experienced during socialism, the restructuring of Caritas into an associational form “went without any major problems” (Pilvousek 2003, 60). They do not associate the change with any paling of religiosity or of the political dimension of religion for that matter. On the contrary, since unification they have only been strengthened in their religious community and continuity.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have tried to disentangle how different notions of the secular and of the religious have emerged as a result of historical, social, and institutional transformations and how they are present in today’s organizational endeavors. The institutional strengthening of the churches after socialism and, in parallel, the withdrawal of the state from social functions meant a complete reorientation of all actors involved in social assistance. In the case of post-socialist East Germany, we need to distinguish not only the secular from the religious but also the relation to the time of social change, now known as the Wende, and in particular to its aftermath. While Caritas was able to adapt to the new structural environment by building on its continuity from the socialist era, Protestant and secular actors experienced a much more clear-cut change. For them, the events that took place around the time of unification laid the foundations for what is viewed today as specifically East German. These distinctions have made it possible, in this article, to draw nearer to the actual complexity of the secular-religious field of social assistance to ex-offenders in today’s East Germany.

The rehabilitation of ex-offenders has become a prominent new social problem following the collapse of socialism. While it was organized by top-down government legislation during the socialist era, the introduction of the principle of subsidiarity turned this upside-down, placing greater importance on civil and religious associations and organizations. This principle was taken from the West German model
of social care, in which Christian organizations played a major role. Some secular and Protestant institutions simply expanded their services to the East, but many East Germans used the change in policy to create secular and religious institutions in their own manner. This article has focused on a several such institutions that began caring for ex-offenders in the 1990s. Values such as humanity and human dignity now guide the actions of both secular and religious East German actors. East Germans active in the reconstruction of the third sector have endowed their practices with meaning and a distinctive and constructive moral orientation that is based on the experience of the Wende. While the relation between the secular and the religious had become increasingly conflictive during the GDR era, the Wende has changed this relation fundamentally. The analysis of the reformation of the institutional landscape of social assistance to ex-offenders in East Germany lastly reveals that, in a way, the secular and the religious agents can be seen to have emerged from one another.

References


CHAPTER NINE

CHURCH BUILDINGS IN EASTERN GERMANY: HOUSES OF GOD OR TOURIST ATTRACTIONS?

Anna Körs

What role do church buildings play in eastern Germany? The sociological relevance of this question comes to the fore in view of the declining church affiliation of the German population, particularly in eastern Germany, in comparison with a strong social movement for the preservation of the church buildings. Against this background, this article aims at finding out what meaning people in fact ascribe to church buildings. For this purpose, it draws on the findings of a comparative study that was carried out within the research project “Symbol churches in radical religious and political changes in the Baltic Sea region.”¹ First, key theoretical categories such as space, cultures of remembrance, and symbolization will be explored in terms of their significance for the question at hand. Then, certain selected empirical findings will be presented, before drawing a conclusion. Since this research study is still a work in progress, theoretical considerations as well as empirical findings are still preliminary.²

INTRODUCTION: DECLINE IN CHURCH MEMBERSHIP VS. INCREASE IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FOR CHURCH BUILDINGS

The religious situation in Germany, as measured by church affiliation, can briefly be characterized as follows: While in 1949, the founding ¹ The project was financed by the Volkswagen Foundation as part of the funding initiative “Unity amidst Variety? Intellectual Foundations and Requirements for an Enlarged Europe.” Its full title is “Symbol churches in radical religious and political changes in the Baltic Sea region. Reconstruction and analysis of their religious and urban uses and functions in Lübeck, Kiel, Wismar, Stralsund, Szczecin, Gdańsk, Kaliningrad.” For research findings see Grünberg (2008).
² An elaborated version will soon be presented as the author’s dissertation entitled “Raum und Identität. Symbolisierungsprozesse am Beispiel von Kirchengebäuden.”
year of the two German states, over 90 percent of the population were still affiliated with the Protestant or Catholic churches (Pollack 2003, 109), in today’s eastern Germany the majority of the population, or about 68 percent, are without religious affiliation, while in western Germany some 76 percent belong to the Protestant or Catholic churches and only about 16 percent are not affiliated with a religious group (ALLBUS 2007, 418, variable 487). Even if the massive decrease in the significance of the church in eastern Germany cannot be explained monocularly, the governance of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) with its policy of antagonism toward churches, political repression, and discrimination against Christians in social life are seen as fundamental causes (Pollack 2003, 95ff.).

The church in the GDR, at the same time, played a particular role, most notably during the period of upheaval in 1989, with a confrontational position with regard to the state and as a representative of the political and social interests of the people. The prime example is the St. Nicholas’ Church in Leipzig, where the Monday prayers had already begun in the early 1980s, which would later evolve into the Monday demonstrations of the late 1980s, in which tens of thousands, or even a hundred thousand people, poured into the streets of Leipzig to demonstrate against the GDR regime. St. Nicholas’ Church was therefore a central starting point of the Peaceful Revolution that brought about the end of the GDR in Autumn 1989 with the subsequent fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification on 3 October 1990. The prominent importance of the established churches was, however, only short-lived and eastern Germany did not undergo a revival of religion and church membership after the collapse of the Communist system as was the case in almost all other post-socialist countries. It has become evident that a dramatic process of de-Christianization (Entkirchlichung) took place especially in eastern Germany, although a loss of societal importance of the churches can be registered in western Germany as well.

3 Of course, “being without church affiliation” does not mean “being without religion,” even though there is a close connection between the two (Pollack 2003, 90). While about a third of the inhabitants of Germany have no church affiliation, about two thirds are regarded as unreligious (Wohlrab-Sahr 2007, 98).

4 The replication of Johann Carl Friedrich Dauhe’s column in the churchyard in 1999, whose neo-classical designs shape the church’s interior space today, is supposed to remind us of these changes and their peacefulness.
These social processes have become apparent in the material basis of churches. Due to the decrease in church membership, declining tax revenues, and exacerbated by the demographical development and in particular the effect of emigration from eastern Germany, the established regional churches now have financial resources that are much too limited to be able to afford the upkeep of the large number of church buildings. Reliable data on the building stock, maintenance costs of and the expected changes in inventory are not readily available. The property estate of the established regional churches and dioceses is extremely heterogeneous and difficult to identify. According to the statistics of the Church Office of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) (2007, 32) based on a 1994 inquiry, the Protestant churches own 21,088 church buildings, and according to the information of the German Bishops’ Conference based on a 2005 inquiry, with information from 23 of Germany’s 27 dioceses, the Catholic Church owns some 24,500 church buildings. While according to the Catholic Church fewer than 3% of its church buildings will fall out of liturgically use over the next ten years, the EKD has not published any exact official figures of this kind. However, both churches have developed guidelines for with the use of church buildings, with the EKD releasing its “Maulbronner Mandat” (Adolphsen and Nohr 2006, 5), while the Catholic Church published guidelines for the conversion of church buildings (German Bishops’ Conference 2003). Though the issue of church building use is nothing new and has been discussed especially within the EKD at least since the 1980s (Nohr 2006, 114 ff.) these recent papers are clearly more pragmatic in providing decisive support for the church parishes as the owner of the buildings, for

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5 In Germany the church’s income results predominantly from the church tax raised by the state as addition to the income tax in the form of a firm percentage that lies between 8% to 9% in the different states of Germany and is required from persons who are officially affiliated with one of Germany’s established churches.

6 A total of about 2.8 million people migrated from 1990 to 2006 (from 1991 without Berlin) from eastern to western Germany and in return 1.5 million people from western to eastern Germany. Hence, eastern Germany has on balance lost some 1.3 million inhabitants through internal migration (Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung 2008, 55).

7 “Süddeutsche Zeitung”, 3 August 2007, p. 41.


9 The statement from within the church’s own ranks that about 50% of the more than 20,000 church buildings will no longer be in use, was disclaimed by the EKD (2005).
example, in cases of impending conversion or abandonment. This phenomenon comes, interestingly, at a time in which Germany’s Muslim communities are building an increasing number of their own houses of worship.10

For now, it could seem as if the situation of the church buildings simply mirrors the social situation with a slight delay, except – and this is what gives reason for the title question – for the fact that church buildings attract a great deal of attention and are the cause of concern of many people. The most prominent example of this phenomenon in Germany has undoubtedly been the Dresden Frauenkirche and its archeologically based reconstruction, which was financed mainly by 100 million euros in donations received from all over the world. The vast amount paid for three quarters of the construction costs demonstrated the enthusiasm of the people and institutions involved.11 Apparently church buildings have a significance that exceeds their conventional functions. This also becomes visible when considering the strong reactions brought about by the current debate on the treatment of church buildings, whether it is about their conversion into secular buildings, their impending demolition, or conversion into mosques. The ensuing protests are expressed in words, development associations are founded, citizens’ action groups are initiated, all with a public spirit and social commitment emerging outside of church congregations and church members, and crossing all municipal, regional, and even national boundaries. Those who become involved with the preservation of church buildings often have little or no ties to any church but still want “to keep the church in town.” This can be said to apply to Germans in general and to eastern Germans in particular, where hundreds of development associations have indeed been founded.12 It seems to be all the more surprising that in eastern

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10 In Germany 184 “classical mosques,” visible by cupola or minaret, are being built or planned and 159 are already in use (“Süddeutsche Zeitung” 2007, 9 October 2007, p. 5). The potential for social conflict posed by such religious buildings is firstly often due to the size of the buildings and their public visibility. The idea of handing over church buildings to non-Christian religious groups has so far been rejected by both the Catholic Church (Sekretariat of the German Bishops’ Conference 2003, 20) as well as by the EKD (Huber 2006, 43).


12 The Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia, for example, has about 200 development associations alone, while the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony has 150, the Evangelical churches of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern 35, and of Thuringia about 70 (Schieder 2006, 443).
Germany, described as “still the most areligious part of the world” (Schmidt and Wohlrab-Sahr 2003), church buildings, of all things, appear to hold a high potential for identification.\textsuperscript{13}

This kind of social phenomenon provides empirical evidence to back the hypothesis that the significance of church buildings cannot be limited to their immediate function as places of worship for a specific religious group. The actual power of church buildings is rather to be seen in their symbolic potential, understood as something that creates meaning in the processes of perceiving, thinking, and feeling in the consciousness of individual persons as well as in the collective mind of a group such as the inhabitants of eastern German cities. Church buildings are, accordingly, not defined as fixed and unchanging objects, but can be understood as social constructions and personal perceptions of space. Before presenting the empirical study and some of its results, a theoretical approach to the issue of the significance and the possible identity-forming effect of church buildings is attempted in the following.

\textbf{CHURCH BUILDINGS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE IN THE PROCESS OF FORMING IDENTITY}

The research study dealt with the built environment and its effect on the people’s perception, orientation, and identification. How, then, does space in general and church space in particular have to be understood? In the following, the terms space and church space will be clarified and questioned with regard to what they contribute to the construction of identity. The process of remembrance turns out to be a specific form of identity building which can be stimulated by church buildings and space in general. Ascribing such meanings to space and to church buildings requires a process of symbolization. In the following, these key categories – space, remembering and symbolization – will be explored.

\textsuperscript{13} For research projects that deal with development associations in eastern Germany see e.g. the project "Kirchbaufördervereine" in Saxony at the Martin-Luther-University of Halle-Wittenberg (Stender 2005; Neugebauer 2009) or "Religionsproduktivität der Moderne" at the University of Rostock. Although there are data available for more than 170 members of the development association of the St. Nicolai Church in Stralsund this specific group will not be considered in this article.
In line with recent sociological concepts (e.g. Löw 2001; Sturm 2000; Schroer 2006; Krämer-Badoni and Kuhm 2003), space can no longer be understood as a material substrate and as a kind of container that is filled with certain contents. Instead, space is defined as a relational arrangement of social goods and beings that has to be constituted continuously, whereas human beings are integrated in a process of synthesis that develops via perception and cognition. Assuming that space is thus “produced” through actions, the research cannot only focus on analyzing human action within space. Instead, space itself has to be looked at as a construction process. This is precisely the perspective of this research project. Only through processes of perceiving, imagining, and remembrance can social goods and people be combined into a whole, which then forms space (“synthesis”) (Löw 2001, 158f.). Against this background, the question was not about what church is as a specific space but how this space is constituted. A number of theories exist for this, especially in the field of (practical) theology (e.g. Raschzok 2003, 391–412), and there are also sociological concepts that try to develop an understanding of church buildings (e.g. Soeffner 2000, 134; Foucault 2005). However, historical or current empirical studies of the different ways churches are used, as well as their mental and emotional effects on people, are still lacking.

How can the relation between space and identity be conceived? Identity is understood here as a permanent process of reflection and interaction by which individuals create images of themselves and of groups (Assmann and Friese 1999). In this context, the central thesis is that the construction of identity does not only take place through interaction with one’s social environment, but that the spatial environment must also be taken into consideration as a decisive factor. This has even more validity if one follows Manuel Castells’ global diagnosis of the present, in that: “Our world, and our lives, are being shaped by the conflicting trends of globalisation and identity” (2004, 1f.). As a result, people all around the globe, with its evolving network of societies and inherent unraveling of space and time, address this with independent forms of expressing collective identity. Consequently, local spaces in particular could become more important: “When networks dissolve time and space, people anchor themselves in places, and recall their historic memory” (Castells 2004, 69). Over the past decade, the spatial dimension has thus become more important for societal
development, simply because of an increase in the acceleration and compression of time and a decrease in the spatial resistance to the movements of finances, material goods, people, and information (Ipsen 1999, 150).

With regard to the church space it can be said, in general, that there are various ways that we may imagine it to initiate processes of orientation, symbolization, and identification. As a space for the church service and other liturgical activities, the church can convey the religious identity of individuals or, as a space for the congregation, a collective sense of religious affiliation; as a space for cultural events meant for a wider cross-section of the urban population, the church may contribute to developing an urban identity, or even engender a feeling of home as a visual element of the cityscape; for former inhabitants and new visitors of the city alike, the church may create a sense of origin or may remind people of particular experiences, perhaps from their childhoods.

Cultures of remembrance

Focusing on memory as a specific social function of space, church buildings can particularly be understood as a medium for recalling the past. For Maurice Halbwachs, there is no collective memory without a spatial framework (1950, 146). He outlines two basic concepts of collective memory. On the one hand, there is a collective memory in terms of the socially-conditioned memory of the individual, which develops with recourse to social frameworks (cadres sociaux). On the other hand, there is a collective memory of groups, e.g. family, religious affiliation, social class. In both cases the spatial component plays an important role: The social frames, on which the individual memory and the act of remembering depend, always draw on spatial frames without which remembering would not be possible. As cadres, therefore, spatial churches are spatial clues that help individuals to anchor their memories in space, time, and the social context. In order to develop a collective memory, groups, especially religious groups, also require spaces in which memory can become concrete, materialize, and thus contribute to the group's identity.

The idea of constructing identity by means of collectively shared memories was adopted and further developed by Pierre Nora and his lieux de mémoire (1984–92). Nora's concept refers to symbolic places or cultural forms of expressing the collective memory, such as regions,
memorials, and personalities. “If the expression lieu de mémoire must have an official definition, it should be this: a lieu de mémoire is any significant entity, whether material or nonmaterial in nature, which under the influence of human will or time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community (in this case, the French community)” (Nora 1997). Unlike Halbwachs’s theory, such lieux de mémoire are not a basis for common remembering and are not able to produce a collective memory. Nora (1990, 11) instead understands lieux de mémoire as symptoms of a break in history that describes the end of a tradition in that there are lieux de mémoire, sites of memory as the term is usually translated, because there are no longer any milieux de mémoire, or real environments of memory (Nora 1990, 11). So lieux de mémoire serve to save the collective memory from its own deterioration and from metamorphosing into mere history. The lieux operate as traces of milieux in a society that is separated from its origins and that remembers and fixes these traces in order to uphold its lost traditions and to maintain its collective identity (Carrier 2002, 144). Nora’s considerations make it clear that churches are remembered and not only relegated to history if a culture of remembrance is activated. Churches, inasmuch as they function as that which they claim to be, are clearly not lieux de mémoire as defined by Nora. However, especially in light of the religious situation in eastern Germany, where the majority of the population has become non-Christian, church buildings might still be interpreted as lieux de mémoire in this spirit, offering a broader cross-section of the population with the opportunity of getting in touch with Christian traditions that may otherwise be apparently lost.14

Such processes can be understood through a differentiation between storage memory and functional memory – and their permeability in particular. Describing the processes of activating and of forgetting the content of cultural memories, Assmann (1999) defines functional

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14 An example is given by one of the interviewed church board members from Wismar with regard to a request of a painters’ guild to consecrate their new flag in St. Nicolai on the occasion of their 100th jubilee. When the church board at first reacted reservedly and explained that this is more a tradition of the Catholic Church while the Protestant Church blesses only people or religious objects, the guild representatives answered that while they are not members of the church, if they were, they would be Protestant. This signaled to the church board that, knowing that Mecklenburg is a Protestant state, the guild wanted to attach themselves to their own traditions even though they no longer actively upheld them.
memory as the inhabited memory consisting of meaningful elements, which can be arranged as a coherent story. Storage memory, on the other hand, is the uninhabited memory, an amorphous mass of meaningless and unlinked elements, which have no vital reference to the present. Although functional memory is responsible for such central tasks as the construction of identity, storage memory is important as well. It serves as a reservoir for future functional memories, and as a resource for the renovation of cultural knowledge. What is crucial is the permeability of both kinds of memory and the resulting possibilities of change and renovation. All elements of storage memory – whenever they gain an additional dimension of meaning for society – can turn into functional memory. It can thus, on the one hand, be observed that certain groups regard churches as, first and foremost, works of art and cultural relics of the past. This tendency, sometimes termed ‘museumization,’ could be interpreted in terms of the church losing its relevance as functional memory in favor of its increasing function as storage memory. On the other hand, it can be observed how people unite in sometimes primarily atheist citizens’ groups that are committed to the preservation of seemingly ‘useless’ church buildings. Assmann’s approach again shows the social construction of space and how a place maintains memories only when people care for it in return (1999, 327). How space takes on meaning and is also possibly linked with memories will finally be explored.

Process of symbolization

Any meaning attached to a church building requires a process of construction and ascription that can be defined as a process of symbolization. Certainly, for every society there is, as Soeffner (1991, 63) points out, a repertoire of traditional, collectively known, handed down, and implicitly effective symbols, especially in religion and the arts. But these symbols, too, owe their existence, in the end, to the human symbolization process. Symbols have to be interpreted and, conversely, the meaning of a symbol can only come about through interpretation. Symbols, therefore, do not previously exist but develop in this process of symbolization (Hüls 1999, 22). For this reason it seems more appropriate to speak of symbolism with reference to the process of symbolization and to its subjectivity, rather than to understand symbols as an a priori given or something that can be objectified definitively (Anderegg 1991, 49). With regard to the churches and the question of their meaning, the process of symbolization is understood as a triadic
relationship between the object, i.e. the church building as such, the subject, i.e. the consciousness that perceives and constructs, and the meaning resulting from this interaction. In light of these theoretical considerations, the purpose of the empirical study was to find out if and in which ways brick Gothic church buildings hold symbolic potential.

Research study: Objects of investigation and mixed-method approach

An empirical comparative study was carried out within the Symbol Churches research project to look into the meaning that people ascribe to church buildings. The results presented in this article concentrate on two churches in eastern Germany: St. Nicolai Church in Wismar and St. Nicolai Church in Stralsund. As a means of comparison and to point out specific characteristics, the results also refer to two churches in western Germany as well: St. Nicolai Church in Kiel and St. Mary’s Church in Lübeck. The churches were selected on the basis of the following criteria of comparison: They were all built in the 13th century during the Hanseatic period, are all examples of brick Gothic architecture, are situated in centers of Hanseatic cities along the German Baltic coast, and are all EKD churches.

St. Nicolai Church in Wismar is one of the three monumental brick Gothic churches of the city and is located, unlike St. Mary and St. George which are located near the market, in the northern part of the city close to the old harbor. St. Nicolai was the only church in Wismar that was not destroyed, surviving World War II quite undamaged, and has therefore maintained its rich furnishings and inventory from the Middle Ages. Furthermore it is the only one of the three main brick Gothic churches that is now used by a congregation. It also, however, consciously serves to reach out to the (widely secularized) city, opening itself up to both locals and tourists alike with various low-threshold offers. The St. Nicolai congregation includes 792 members (2003), whereas some 88 percent of the inhabitants of Wismar are not members of a confession. Together with the two other main brick

\[\text{15 St. Nicolai Church in Kiel is the main church of the city and sticks out in the former historic center of Kiel, surrounded by buildings from the 1950s and 1960s.}\]

\[\text{16 St. Mary’s Church in Lübeck is the third largest church in Germany and a prototype for approximately 80 other brick Gothic churches in the Baltic Sea Area.}\]
Gothic churches, St. Nicolai forms the architectural ensemble characteristic for the city, which was listed as a World Heritage Site in 2002.

St. Nicolai Church is Stralsund’s oldest church, located in the town’s historic center, on the market square directly next to the town hall. Having sustained some damage in 1944, the building was reconstructed between 1948 and 1954. From 1971 to 1981, the outer building was restored with considerable church funds, and the restoration of the inner building began in 1980. In spite of heavy losses, St. Nicolai still maintains an extraordinary and extensive medieval interior and, in terms of its inventory, is one of the richest churches in northern Europe. Since the church parish was fused with two other parishes in 2002, it now includes 4,200 members, up from about 1,000 members. Approximately 12 percent of the Stralsund population belongs to the Protestant Church. The St. Nicolai congregation views itself as being built upon four equal pillars: It is 1) a liturgical place (services, prayer, meditation), 2) a cultural place, 3) a place for music and the arts, and 4) a place for community and festivities. A development association was founded during the unification period in 1990, which has since grown to nearly 800 members and has provided much financial support. As in Wismar, St. Nicolai combines with two other brick Gothic churches, St. Mary’s and St. Jacob’s, to form the architectural cityscape of Stralsund, which was included in the UNESCO list at the same time as Wismar.

The research project looked into the issue of the meanings ascribed to the particular churches and whether any patterns of constructing meanings can be found. For this, a mixed-method approach was developed, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses in different stages of the research process.\footnote{The study was composed of three phases of analysis. First, the churches were analyzed in general by means of secondary data and additional information from interviews (1. synoptical analysis). Then, several church officials per church were interviewed in depth (e.g. pastor, provost, parish council, chairman of the development association) (2. qualitative expert questioning). Based on this, different types of visitors (parishioners, local residents, and tourists from outside the city) were questioned by means of a mostly standardized questionnaire (3. quantitative questioning of church visitors). “Parishioners” are defined as persons who belong to the parish of the particular church the questioning was related to. “Local residents” are persons who live in the particular city but do not belong to the parish of the particular church the questioning was related to. “Tourists” are visitors of the particular church who live outside the city and do not belong to the parish of the particular church. Both “local residents” and “tourists” might or might not be members of a Christian church (or another religion) and belong to another parish church than they were interviewed for.}
While qualitative expert interviews informed us of the assumed meanings of the church buildings, the quantitative study aimed at evaluating these meanings in terms of their significance for church visitors. Given a list of 23 meanings extracted from the qualitative material through content analysis, one central question to the church visitors was: “If you think about what you personally associate with [St. Nicolai], to what degree do the following statements apply to you or not? I associate with [St. Nicolai] …”. Using factor analysis, six underlying dimensions of meaning could be identified. In the following, these six dimensions will be qualified and analyzed in terms of their significance. While our focus will be on the two churches in eastern Germany, in Wismar and Stralsund, they will be contrasted with the two churches in western Germany, in Kiel and Lübeck for comparison. The results are summarized in the following.

The church buildings are chiefly perceived in their architectural-atmospheric dimension, whereas the outside appearance generally has an even stronger impact on the people than does the interior space. On average 90 percent of church visitors associate the particular church with “the church building and that it is an impressive work of architecture”; 86 percent associate it with “the church’s interior space and its particular atmosphere.” This applies to all the churches in the study to nearly the same extent. The church buildings of the study are characterized by an immediate visual impact on the church visitors, which can again lead to elemental experiences, when e.g. the visible size of the church building creates a “feeling of security,” a “feeling of grandness” and makes you realize “how little and unimportant humans are,” which can, however, also be quite “calming, because one does not have to be the navel of the world.” One further question remains: “What does the church building symbolize when going beyond visual evidence?” Or, as one of the interviewed experts put it into words: “The task is now to have this church not only seen in terms of its impressive

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18 The analysis is based on a non-representative sample of 1,641 valid cases (Kiel = 464, Lübeck = 399, Wismar = 272, Stralsund = 506). The percentages refer to the frequencies of the combined answer categories “applies fully,” “applies mostly.”
19 One open question to the church visitors was: “What feelings does the (St. Nicolai) church evoke?” The quotations in the text are taken from the answers that referred to the size of the particular church building.
architecture but also in terms of its inner message. Its purpose is in fact to direct us to God.”

The church buildings were indeed perceived in their religious dimension, with this type of response being the second most common. On average about two-thirds of the church visitors associated the particular churches with “God and Christian beliefs” (68%) or “that something exists that transcends humanity” (69%). Somewhat fewer church visitors related the church to their everyday lives and stated that the church stood for something that “gives meaning to my life and keeps me grounded” (59%). There are, however, significant differences among the churches. In terms of the comparison between East and West, it was striking that St. Nicolai of Stralsund and St. Nicolai of Wismar were less associated with the religious dimension than St. Nicolai of Kiel and St. Mary’s of Lübeck. The level of agreement in terms of the three mentioned items in the Eastern churches was about 14, 13, and 18 percentage points respectively lower than in the Western churches in terms of the three aforementioned items. Looking more closely at the three groups of church visitors, we see that the differences can be explained primarily by the differences between the groups of local residents in general, whereas the differences between the groups of the parishioners are marginal, and the differences between the groups of tourists are in between the other two. As a result, the church buildings in Wismar and particularly in Stralsund are associated with “God and Christianity” by a much smaller proportion of those interviewed in the particular city (60.4% and 35.6% respectively) than was the case for St. Nicolai in Kiel and St. Mary’s in Lübeck (78.9% and 74.2% respectively). This also applies to the other two indicators, “something that transcends humanity” (Wismar: 53%, Stralsund: 41% vs. Kiel: 82%, Lübeck 80%) and “something that gives meaning to life” (Wismar: 39%, Stralsund: 31% vs. Kiel: 73%, Lübeck 76%).

The church buildings, furthermore, imply urban meaning as well, in terms of their being perceived as town landmarks and being associated with the city’s history and past and present development. It is again chiefly the visual impression that is shared by most of the people: Nearly two thirds (65%) of the church visitors stated that “the steeple and the silhouette of the city” came to mind when they thought of the particular church. For almost half (47%) of the church visitors interviewed, the particular church building conjures up associations with “the city, its past and present development” and “the city and its history during the Middle Ages and through the Hanseatic period” (50%).
These urban meanings seem to apply to the majority of the parishioners and local residents, and for about half of the tourists.

Unlike the architectural atmospheric meanings, the church buildings also alluded to other churches than the one that is concerned, either to other churches in general or to brick Gothic churches in particular. While about a third of the church visitors relate the particular church building with “other churches elsewhere” (35%), about half of the church visitors associated it with “other brick Gothic churches in the Baltic area” (53%). Especially the reference to other brick Gothic churches applies to the churches in eastern Germany to a greater extent, most notably to St. Nicolai in Wismar (65%). This is again likely to have been caused by the high local value placed in the church buildings as objects of local identification after German reunification, most prominently in Wismar, but in Stralsund as well. As one member of the Wismar city council, which is the legal owner of St. Nicolai church, explained, the Wende caused problems of identification for those with positions of responsibility in the church, church parishes, and city council, as well as for the overall local community. The people had to reorient themselves and had to learn how to deal with changing realities. Those with positions of responsibility in the church and their parishes had to find a new self-image beyond their opposition to the state. And the city was confronted with the problem of identification and rediscovered the brick Gothic churches in this context as something particularly special. The city council member explained:

> Every city has to try – and this applies to us after the Wende in particular because we somehow had to establish ourselves – we had to find our way and our standing. What is actually our unique characteristic (…) what distinguishes us from others, and what unites us? But the brick Gothic church buildings are something special not only in Wismar, but also in Rostock, also in Stralsund.

Being included in the UNESCO World Heritage list for the town's brick Gothic buildings and especially churches, did not only lead to a higher touristic attractiveness but was rather important for the civic pride and the people’s identification with the city.

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20 These items especially refer to the central question of the Symbol Church project whether the churches could create a mental connection in today’s consciousness through their similar architecture that mirrors their common history, and thus make a specific contribution to the process of European integration (Körs and Lüde 2007).
The churches, moreover, convey historical meaning: the universal history of humanity, both past and future, as well as the German history in particular, including its last two major turning points, in 1945 after the World War II, and in 1989/90 with German reunification. While the church visitors associated each church with the history of humanity to around the same extent, including associations with “human life and the generations that have lived before us” (50%) and “the future and what could happen next” (39%), there are some very noticeable differences involving their meaning in the context of German history.

The churches in western Germany were seen to stand more for the “Second World War and its destruction” (Kiel: 44%, Lübeck: 55% vs. Wismar 28%, Stralsund: 25%) and for “the rebuilding of the church” afterwards (Kiel: 44%, Lübeck: 51% vs. Wismar 38%, Stralsund: 39%); while the churches in eastern Germany represented “the political events in the 80s and 90s” much more (Wismar: 26%, Stralsund: 29% vs. Kiel: 12%, Lübeck: 13%). This is not astonishing as the churches in Kiel and Lübeck were hit much harder by the devastation of war while the churches in Wismar and Stralsund were involved much more in the societal changes during the Wende period. There can be various reasons explaining why the meaningful socio-political changes of 1989/90 are not anchored even more strongly in the people’s minds.

The prayers for peace in Stralsund indeed began in St. Nicolai itself, reflecting the work of the former pastor and his strong political engagement. But when attendance increased at a time when St. Nicolai was being renovated, they moved to St. Mary’s Church which, seating up to three thousand people, was better equipped to hold the large crowds and may therefore be more appropriately associated with the events of the Wende period. As was borne out in interviews, however, the same thing happened locally that could be observed for churches in eastern Germany in general: After the short upsurge in interest when the churches were a platform for the opposition to the SED state, they lost their representative function and fell out of the public attention. As in Stralsund, St. Nicolai of Wismar was, for political reasons, also host to a much larger number of people in 1989 than it had for many decades. According to one of the Wismar city councilors, most of the people considered the church to be an appropriate place for this type of political gathering, but did not attach any political meaning to it: “In those days and weeks, you see, the church had a kind of function, one that people would soon forget again. The only ones who forgot it less, or not at all, were the church congregations themselves.”
The particular position of the parishioners who drew the link between the church building and the changes of 1989/90 more than anyone else is also reflected in the data. While this association applies to almost every other parishioner interviewed in Wismar (44%) and Stralsund (45%) it only applied to every third local resident there (Wismar: 33%, Stralsund: 33%) and every fifth tourist (Wismar: 20%, Stralsund 22%).

The churches were, lastly, perceived in their dimension as centers of parish and liturgical life. More than anything else, the parishioners associated the church with “specific events” such as worship services, festivities etc. (82%), “personal or familiar events,” “the pastor,” “a feeling of home,” or indeed “the congregation” (59%). These connotations were of very low importance to tourists, but did, however, apply to a certain extent to other local residents, of whom 55%, for example, said the church building evokes “a feeling of home” and 56% associated the church with “specific events,” even as the other items received much less agreement on their part. This would seem to indicate that they actively take part in church life and represent a specific group of local residents with a relatively strong religious orientation. Comparing the data of the parish groups, the parish in Wismar shows an above-average level of agreement for every item up to 28 percentage points higher than the parishes in Kiel and Lübeck. According to religious sociological studies, church members in eastern Germany, despite their minority situation, have a relationship with their particular congregation that is scarcely more intensive than church members in western Germany (Pollack 2003, 87).

However, this finding does not run contrary to the presumption that active parish members, as they were surveyed in eastern Germany in particular, have a relatively stronger relationship to their church than is the case for parishes in western Germany, especially if they had lived through the GDR period as a parish member themselves. The statements from the expert interviews support such an interpretation. Indeed, against the background of the GDR, there was a need to reconcile the process of opening and the church as a congregational space, particular at St. Nicolai in Wismar, which had the added distinction of being the only brick Gothic church in Wismar that was in fact being used as a parish church. The parish members indeed had specific needs, including a strong longing for a feeling of home and a sense of family, in addition to a need for continuity in changing times, needs that were partly at odds with the desire to open the church up more to the broader
public. It was, furthermore, difficult for some of the parish members to accommodate, without any reservations, the people who had arrived after the Wende, while they themselves had carried the church banner during the GDR period as well. One former pastor at St. Nicolai represented the position of the parish:

It is in fact a kind of learning experience for us as a congregation, so it isn't just a problem for people who are now cautiously finding their way here, but it is in fact also a change in mentality for us. We have always been in this space and there are surely people in the congregation who were not overjoyed when the new people came because they had the feeling that we have borne the banner of the church the whole time, remaining loyal, and now that it doesn't cost anything anymore, they can just come like that.

The fact that the parish in Stralsund is not very similar to the parish in Wismar but more like those in Kiel and Lübeck with regard to connotations such as the congregation and church life might reflect the changes in the Stralsund parish since its fusion with two other parishes in 2002.

**Conclusion**

The church buildings analyzed in this study can be interpreted as collectively shared symbols. They are perceived as extraordinary spaces by a wide range of people, while their specific potential lies in their allowing a variety of meanings and remaining diffuse instead of clearly definable. This highly symbolic potential corresponds, as further data show, with their specific quality as emotional spaces. Just under four fifths (79%) of the church visitors interviewed stated that the particular church building evokes positive emotions in them, not necessarily based on personal experiences but also on the “atmosphere” of the building itself, in an intermediate phenomena between subject and object (see also Grünberg and Körs 2008, 247f.). Even if they are of importance in one's personal life, people consider them as significant spaces for society. Through this broad effect they can help to build and strengthen a sense of community and belonging in different dimensions (religious, urban, political, historical, etc.) and with different scopes of reach (local, regional, national, European).

This should not, however, hide the fact that differences have also emerged, or indeed suggest the existence of universal meanings. The construction of symbolic references and hence the meaning of church
buildings is an ever-changing social activity that is integrated with other societal structures as well. Due to their symbolic load, the churches of eastern Germany became spaces of particular importance in the process of transformation, thus developing a specific new symbolic reference, but also losing some of their significance as a religious place during the GDR period in the process. As this illustrates, even meanings such as “God and Christianity” that are taken for granted or believed to be unchangeable, can still change, diminish, become marginal, or even disappear. This is likely to apply to a typical cross-section of the population of eastern Germany towns even to a much greater extent than it turned out to hold true for the people surveyed in this study.

This finally refers to a general limitation of the findings due to the underlying data from the selected sample of parishioners, local residents, and tourists – who in any case had been inside the church buildings. The presented research study focused chiefly on the perspective of the church (expert interviews) and subgroups closest to the church (questioning of church visitors). This could provide unique data material and empirical findings in terms of the present symbolic meanings of central city churches from the perspective of the church visitors. One future task is to lay open further perspectives of the high proportion of people who do not visit church buildings. Comparing visitors and non-visitors would provide valuable information on the degree to which the findings can be generalized for larger parts of society. As the study also dealt with a specific type of church buildings another open question is how different types are perceived, e.g. village churches or churches built in the postwar period.

References


CONCLUSION

DEALING WITH TWO MASTERS’ COMMANDS – EXPLORATIONS OF THE COMPLEXITIES OF RELIGIOUS LIFE UNDER A DICTATORIAL REGIME

Monika Wohlrab-Sahr

Looking at the contributions to this volume as a whole, they lay out an impressive mosaic of the secular-religious conditions in the GDR, as well as of their consequences in a new setting after 1989. Bringing together the disciplines of anthropology, history, political science, and sociology, what unites the articles is their qualitative approach. This implies that they do not look only at the official politics of church and state, the measures taken by them and their legitimating ideologies. All of them add personal agency and interpretation to the picture: Life under the conditions of a dictatorial regime – in spite of the difficulties that it created for the religiously bound and political dissenters – was not the life of marionettes. It was the life of agents, may they be secularist or religious, fiercely ideological or rather indifferent, sympathetic to Communism or strictly opposing it, or just trying to live their lives as well as possible.

Reading the articles from a comparative perspective, they also show that secularization in the GDR was neither an “automatic” process of religious decline nor a simple process of political oppression, but rather a process with many conflicting agents under very different conditions. The collection thus shows how problematic it is to subsume the secularization process in the GDR under one single explanatory model. Nevertheless, it has much to contribute to an attempt towards multi-causal explanation and to the possible concepts used in such an attempt.

Education was an important battlefield with regard to the attempts of the SED regime to change the ideological commitment of its population: Two of the articles – by Wappler and Schmidt-Lux – deal with the fields of adult education and of schools. Thomas Schmidt-Lux shows to what degree the dominant institution of popular adult education – the URANIA – was used to bring not only scientific knowledge to the
overall population, but also to spread an atheist ‘scientific worldview’ which was in open contradiction with religion. The message to be taught was that religion is something that cannot be combined with a scientific perspective, but instead only contradicts it. The forefathers of German Monism were invoked in this attempt to create secular minds.

The conflictive relationship between science and religion has been thoroughly questioned in the sociological debate on secularization. Schmidt-Lux makes it clear that the leading functionaries of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) were indeed able to employ one strand of modernist ideology as it was developed in Europe in the 19th century: the idea that science would overcome all “irrational beliefs” in the long run.

One might expect such ideological attempts to be of only little importance to the population, and to remain on the superficial level of state ideology. However, a significant difference with regard to the assessment of science between East and West Germans continues to exist today, indicating that this “scientistic” ideology was indeed successful and actually survived the breakdown of the socialist system. As part of a modernist ideology it could be detached from its political connotations – the same, by the way, holds true for women’s participation in the labor force. This underlines the importance of interpreting dictatorial developments as one possible pathway to modernity, as Shmuel Eisenstadt (2000) has suggested in his model of “multiple modernities.” They are not just “aberrations” from the right path of modernity, but share some of its characteristic features which make them attractive to people even if they do not buy its political message. Gender equality at work, secularism, and scientism are three basic convictions that survived the socialist system and still continue to show up in statistics as well as in characteristic societal conflicts.

This may in the end have been more important than the ruling party’s diverse attempts at vesting the communist regime with quasi-religious symbolism that Nikolai Vokuv deals with in his article.

The interviews with former functionaries of URANIA show the survival of different types of secularist ideology through the present, even if the conviction that the path of history will lead into a glorious, secular future, has given way to skepticism. Schmidt-Lux’ article gives three exemplary types of secular worldviews: (1) A strict scientism in line with the tradition of Monism, which consistently opts for the replacement of religion by science; (2) a materialistic secularism that rejects
religion as something non-provable, and the church as being entangled with the ruling classes, and which consequently would only allow for religiosity in a strictly private sense; and finally (3) a plea for functional differentiation, which distinguishes between religion and science as incomparable and mutually incompatible matters – an attitude that may correlate with personal religious indifference as well as with a type of subjective religiosity.

Schools were another arena in which the ideological battle took place. It is a well known fact that children coming from Christian families in the GDR were faced with severe problems when it came to receiving higher education and obtaining access to universities. The participation in the Jugendweihe coming-of-age ritual instead of (or in addition to) a Christian Confirmation was an important test of the loyalty of young people towards the state. The replacement of coming-of-age rituals was certainly an important step in the regime’s struggle for the youth (see Vukov’s article in this volume). However, this required loyal teachers who kept students in line with official doctrine and kept them away from competing ideologies. The educators’ education and the replacement of those who resisted the new ideology was of crucial importance to the authoritarian regime as it is in any regime change.

Kirstin Wappler’s article deals with two ‘atypical’ regions of East Germany, whose developments are nevertheless highly informative for the secularization process in the GDR: The Erzgebirge as a staunchly Protestant region, and the Eichsfeld as a closed Catholic milieu. Wappler’s article deals with school politics in both regions and shows the complexity of the secularization process in the GDR. Far from just opposing a “stable” Catholic and an “internally secularized” Protestant milieu, she works out the influence of both state politics and strategies of the Christian milieus or subcultures. Indeed, the closed Catholic milieu was able to resist the state intervention: Participation rates in the Jugendweihe remained generally low. The church managed to keep Catholics in central political positions and even to exert influence on the education of young teachers.

The development in the Erzgebirge not only differed from that in terms of having a less closed milieu (with rural as well as industrial populations living in this region), but also in terms of the party’s strategies. The Protestant Church as the area’s majority church was the focus of political intervention, and the Erzgebirge became a center in the establishment of the dictatorship. The different outcomes were therefore brought about by a mixed effect of different political measures
taken in different places, and of different potentials of certain regions and milieus to resist such measures – which in turn influenced the political measures. Under dictatorial conditions, the closeness of the Catholic network and the homogeneity of the Catholic milieu, especially in rural areas – according to Wappler – created a situation, in which “the lines of the authority ran opposite those in the rest of the GDR.” This was a precondition for keeping religious affiliation and practice high – and to place the risks of deviation on the side of those who did not conform to the Catholic majority: Wappler gives the example of a Catholic boy who participated in the Jugendweihe and – as a consequence – was not only denied Confirmation, but also got beaten up by Catholic youth, who marked him with a “J” for “Judas.”

What was possible for a tight Catholic network and a homogeneous social milieu also holds true for certain religious minorities. Malgorzata Rajtar deals with the example of Jehovah’s Witnesses, a religious sect (in the Weberian sense) whose followers – due to their resistance regarding certain obligations to the state – had to suffer severe problems in the GDR. In spite of obvious oppression, the group managed to maintain the number of their members stable throughout the time of the GDR. Rajtar’s article reveals the importance of family socialization and of the strict seclusion from non-Witnesses in the private realm as the main instrument for maintaining the group’s stability and for keeping its beliefs unquestioned. Similar to some of the Protestant or Catholic families, though to a much greater degree, the women in the Jehovah’s Witness families decided to stay home with their children instead of going to work, in order to lessen the state’s influence on children’s socialization. The interviews with Jehovah’s Witnesses explore what this socialization process was like: first of all, it was about adjusting children to a religious way of looking at the world and “duplicate” all visible things into something created by Jehovah; it was also about getting them used to the different kinds of religious practice, including missionary work, at a very early age. Another important means was to minimize their relations with their non-believing surroundings, especially in terms of peer-group relations. Whereas the members of other religious groups made differentiated decisions on the level of legitimate compromise with the system – about what to accept and what to reject, when to participate and when not to, when to be inflexible and when to compromise – the children of Jehovah’s Witnesses did not participate in any of the state’s youth organizations or activities.
And – when military service became compulsory – male Witnesses rejected the service, choosing imprisonment instead.

Compared to the Catholics’ position in the Eichsfeld, Jehovah’s Witnesses are an example of firm resistance against the socialist state’s claims for loyalty; a form of resistance however that was not specifically directed against dictatorial regimes, but rather against every secular state as belonging to the Devil’s regime. The consequent action was based on a clear-cut picture of what belongs to God or to the Devil, and on the avoidance of ideological and social heterogeneity.

What clearly distinguishes the Eichsfeld Catholics from Jehovah’s Witnesses are their strategies towards the state: The Catholic network in the Eichsfeld was successful because they were able to infiltrate the realm of the state with Catholic teachers and through the political influence of the CDU. Jehovah’s Witnesses were successful (in terms of the group’s stability) by keeping as much distance as they could from state organizations. In Weberian terms, these are ideal-typical church and sect strategies: attempts to influence the world on the one side, and rejection from the world on the other, the latter supported by a worldview that strictly distinguishes between the divine and satanic spheres.

Despite their differences, the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Catholics of the Eichsfeld are similar in their degree of closeness as a socio-moral milieu or a religious group; which clearly distinguished them from the adherents of other churches in the GDR.

How do ‘ordinary’ church members recollect their experiences in the GDR and the problems that they had to overcome?

The articles of Uta Karstein and Esther Peperkamp deal with those members and their recollections of their situation in the GDR. Uta Karstein provides the example of three Catholic families, whose narratives stand for ideal-typical ways of making sense of their position in the GDR. The semantics they refer to can be seen as basic figures of legitimation in the dictatorial state that people with a Christian background could access. The semantics they are using predate the GDR by far, and it is this far-reaching historical horizon that allows them to function as figures of legitimation. By using them, the speakers evoke a long history of relating religion and society, God and the individual, believers and citizens to each other. These semantics must not be taken at face value; they do not simply express how people actually behaved. They instead document how people make sense of the positions and decisions they took, and of the compromises they made. “No one can
serve two masters” and “render unto Caesar” are indeed two contrary positions on one’s loyalty towards the Church and state, the former indication that a divided loyalty can put limitations on what the state may demand. In most of the cases entailing exclusive loyalty towards the Church, this did not include the readiness to go into prison for one’s convictions, as it was the case with male Jehovah’s Witnesses. But there were symbolic boundaries that were not supposed to be transgressed. For many Catholics, participation in the Jugendweihe was considered to be such a boundary, the violation of which was sanctioned in the Church community, and if the network was close – like in the Eichsfeld – also in the local community. Karstein also shows that the discourse in which these semantics are included not only functions to make sense of one’s own past. It also is used to give order to the religious field, drawing boundaries between Catholics and Protestants, between loyalty and disloyalty, and between “rational” and “irrational” behavior towards the state.

It is interesting that even semantics indicating one’s opting out of a Christian framework ("There is no God") at least partially remains within the framework of Christian narratives. In spite of its rational undertone, suggesting that the speaker’s Christian beliefs were abandoned due to rational considerations (as the dominant societal discourse clearly suggested), the narrative at the same time remains one of theodicy, an accusation of a God who does not care for his followers. Changing sides becomes a consequence to be taken for rational reasons, while maintaining the flavor of religious argument.

Esther Peperkamp’s article deals with the educational and professional careers of Christians in Saxony, and addresses the “worldly” consequences of people’s commitment to the churches. In many cases, church members and their children suffered from severe disadvantages with regard to their chances of receiving a high school diploma (Abitur) that allows access to the university. As a consequence, Christians quite often ended up as trades people. In present statistics, the lack in higher education among the older age groups of church members who went to school during the GDR period is still visible. Peperkamp’s interviews show that church members were looking for positions in niches, in jobs with less state control, or they decided to become self-employed as trades people in order to avoid conflicts of loyalty.

In spite of obvious disadvantages, Peperkamp’s interviewees did not present themselves as victims of the system. They instead present themselves as people who decided themselves on the degree to which
they got involved in the political system. So it was not just the political system depriving Christians of their career opportunities, but also the Christians themselves making a final decision on what they were willing to accept and what not.

While this certainly indicates a choice of priorities and the maintenance of agency in a dictatorial system, it also indicates the subtle effects of the dictatorial regime. Not only did Christians have lesser chances or were excluded from certain positions, but they were indeed forced into a decision that eventually made the outcome a consequence of their own actions. It is this fine line between exclusion and self-exclusion that characterizes the dictatorial regime. It did not just compel people to behave in a certain way; it rather forced them to consider the possible consequences of their alternative loyalties and to take the responsibility for the negative outcome. This sheds a light on the slight difference between force and power. Power, as Niklas Luhmann (2003, 9–11) has put it, is greater the more it is able to influence the free will of others. Power is about steering the freedom of others, and not about simply breaking their will. In this regard, the semantics of loyalty that Karstein deals with and the narratives about personal decisions related to careers in Peperkamp’s article can be considered to be two sides of the same coin.

Three of the articles in this volume deal with religion and religiosity in East Germany under post-socialist conditions. The areas touched upon are characteristic for the altered situation, even if the heritage of the GDR and the transition period remains visible. Anja Frank deals with the subjective religiosity of young East Germans against the background of the profound secularization process during the GDR period. Anna Körs presents research on the changing role of church buildings in East Germany. Irene Becci, lastly, deals with the interface of the secular and the religious in the field of social assistance. The latter two contributions reflect the new role of the churches as officially recognized public agents and as locations of public interest.

Anja Frank’s article deals with a question that is of vivid interest for the research on processes of profound secularization, especially in Communist countries: Will religiosity regain vitality after the breakdown of these regimes, and – if this is the case – how will this unfold? Different from other post-socialist countries with their often close connection between religion and nationalism, the religious development in eastern Germany has not fulfilled any expectations regarding religious vitalization to this day. This gives eastern Germany the status
of an “exception” to the seeming rule of religiosity flourishing worldwide. The majority of the overall population in eastern Germany not only stays away from the churches, but also from religion in general (Wohlrab-Sahr 2009). There is no vivid religiosity outside the churches, but rather persistent secularism and areligiosity. Scholars who assume an anthropologically based quest for religiosity have problems in comprehending the stability of subjective secularity in eastern Germany.

People under the age of 30, however, are deviating from this general pattern to a certain degree. Even if the vast majority of them remain as areligious as their parents and grandparents are, statistics indicate that a growing minority of them is displaying a certain interest in religiosity, as is documented in a growing belief in the afterlife and in occultism. Anja Frank explores in her paper the motives and motifs of such adolescent religiosity, especially among those who come from atheist or secularist families. She presents ‘culture’ and ‘utopia’ as two motifs of renewed interest in religion among young East Germans. Religion as a symbol for utopia is used in contrast to a world experienced as egoistic and materialistic. This semantic employs the early modern distinction between society vs. community (Tönnies) and uses religion in a very general sense as a metaphor for the utopia of a community-oriented life that presents an alternative to the “coldness” and “individualism” of the present society.

A second perspective that Anja Frank explores in her interviews, is a growing interest in the cultural heritage of religion, its stock of knowledge, its heroic figures and musical tradition. Feelings of belonging, of cultural authenticity and emotional depth, as well as personal encounters have played an important role in the religious explorations of these interviewees.

The experiences described and the ideas developed in these interviews, however, remain on a level that Thomas Luckmann, in line with Alfred Schütz, would characterize as the level of “middle transcendence”. References to God or to the beliefs of the Christian tradition play little role in these narratives. Even if Frank’s sample is not representative in statistical terms, her findings nevertheless indicate that East German adolescents have been exploring religion in a post-traditional manner. This creates difficulties for the official churches which are often immediately identified with tradition. It also creates difficulties for them because this type of religious reasoning is to a large degree non-institutional or even anti-institutional. Some of these post-traditional explorations in the field of religion may remain at the level
of personal reflection without leading into any kind of religious community. They may instead feed a discourse that unites life-world communities in their general reference to the world. Other types of exploration may lead into a niche within the mainline churches, like the choir in which one of Frank’s interviewees has found her place. Others – which have not been addressed in the paper – may find their way into charismatic churches, which are growing in East Germany, even if not to the degree that they have grown in other countries.

According to Anja Frank’s findings, the reference to religion allows the members of the younger generation to distinguish themselves from the “materialistic” worldviews of their parents, but at the same time to follow up on a general anti-capitalist discourse which unites them with the older generations. The author hypothesizes that the younger generations are transforming the conflict of religion vs. politics that was constitutive for their parents’ generation into a dichotomy of materialism vs. idealism.

In her article on church buildings in eastern Germany, Anna Körs refers to a study that explored the meanings that representative church buildings have for their visitors. She underlines the importance that people ascribe to church buildings as emotional spaces. Even visitors who are not religious themselves consider those churches being important places for society.

The article also presents findings that are of special interest to the situation that existed in the GDR and the role of the churches in the transition process. Several East German churches, especially Protestant ones, have been important places for gatherings during the transition period. These churches are symbols for the period and for the active engagement of church people, especially within the parishes themselves, but also to some degree for the visitors of the churches. During the political process of 1989, Protestant parishes were particularly in the center of the opposition movement. Their churches were places where people could meet and the movement could grow. Surveys immediately following the transition showed that the churches were institutions highly trusted by the population. This situation, however, would change rapidly, and trust in the churches would decline. The availability of a public sphere outside the churches soon lessened their attractiveness as places to gather. Moreover, new forms of interest – especially touristic interest – would soon emerge. Competing claims of what is relevant and to whom the church actually belongs become visible in the expert interviews that Anna Körs refers to. Symbols of
personal struggle are turned into historic symbols and as such are turned into places of touristic interest. Under the new circumstances this evoked a new debate about what the churches were supposed to stand for: to what degree they were places of historic commemoration and cultural edification, and to what degree they were to be places of living religious community. In regions where religious communities are diminishing, the perceived conflict between the two perspectives is even greater. The problem of in-group and out-group relations that was of importance under the dictatorial regime has thus reemerged under new circumstances. However, the position of the in-group has changed markedly. The transformation of an active group, which was politically under pressure, but nevertheless highly legitimated, into one that – as a small minority – is expected to administrate the historical memory represented in the church building to an unspecific public, creates severe tensions.

Irene Becci also deals with the transformation that the churches underwent with the political transformation, especially with the adoption of the Western model of church-state-relations. This also implied cooperation in the realm of civil services. The situation changed fundamentally especially for civil activists who – during the GDR period – were active under the auspices of the churches or who became mediators at the round tables during the transition process.

Becci highlights the paradox situation of East German churches after the reunification. On the one hand, they received remarkable political and juridical recognition by the state; on the other hand, the legitimacy they received from their constituency was low: Only 25 percent of East Germans were members of a church.

For church activists in the realm of social assistance, this often leads to the assumption that religious groups have to express themselves in a secular way when they take on public tasks. Becci examines this situation more closely in the realm of offender rehabilitation programs. She shows that, in particular, Protestant activists in these programs tend to avoid speaking in religious terms and use the secular language of democracy and freedom instead. Amidst this secular language, however, the narratives of the transitional period (Wendezeit), in which the churches played an important role as moderators of the process, are treated as myths of origin for the democratic regime, and democracy and civil society are treated as collective goods to be handled with particular care. This mythical language and the positive reference to the
round tables as experiences of basic democracy bring them close to activists in secular organizations.

Returning to the image of the mosaic that the articles constitute, this mosaic not only includes the varieties of religious expression under the dictatorial regime, but also spans the period of two political regimes. The old conflicts of how to maintain one’s beliefs and religious practice under hostile conditions, has given way to the question of how to relate one’s convictions to the conditions of a state that grants religious freedom and requires the churches’ contribution to the civil sphere, and how on the other hand to relate to a society that is more or less indifferent with regard to religion and pays tribute to religious activities only if they comply with the rules of the public arena. It is this situation that may bring religious activists to yearn for a situation that was more dangerous, but in which the priorities in life were much clearer and the perceived importance and legitimacy of religious activities much higher.

References

INDEX

Abitur, 80, 98, 111–13, 116–18, 140, 214.
Alltagsgeschichte. See history of everyday life
anti-clericalism, 26.
atheism, 28, 59.
atheistic worldview, 102, 125.
Asad, Talal, 3, 5, 12, 168.
Barth, Karl, 70.
Berger, Peter L., 1, 3, 22, 23, 37.
Berlin Wall, construction of, 63, 92.
fall of, 9, 126, 190.
Berliner Stadtmission, 177–79.
bourgeoisie, 26.
Bruce, Steve, 13.
capitalism, critique of, 100, 102, 157.
Casanova, Jose, 23 n. 5, 108.
Cassirer, Ernst, 90.
Castells, Manuel, 194.
Catholic Center Party, 66.
Catholic Church, 5, 13, 66–68, 72, 92–93, 171, 211–12, 214.
and SED, 8–9, 67, 71, 83–84.
CDU See Christian Democratic Union
Charismatic Christianity, 117, 120, 217.
Christian Democratic Union, 66, 114, 116, 118.
Christian Scientists, 7, 9.
Christian social doctrine, 175.
Christian teachers, 64, 67, 69, 71, 81–82.
dismissal of, 54, 63, 65, 69.
imitation, 64.
education and training of, 66, 69, 75.
church buildings, 16, 189, 191–93, 196, 200, 205, 217.
conversion of, 191.
renovation of, 192, 199.
significance of, 193, 197, 205, 218.
church in socialism, 9.
church of silence, 9, 13.
church space, 193–5, 200.
and Catholic Church, 8, 67–68, 71.
and Protestant Church, 53–54, 63, 65, 77.
and religious minorities, 9.
civil society, 175.
Confessing Church, 70.
Communist man. See socialist personality
communist ideology. See Marxism-Leninism
Comte, Auguste, 21, 25.
conflict, ideological, 20, 88, 91, 101–2, 139, 149, 213.
of values, 149.
of worldviews, 13, 24, 37, 76, 89, 103, 149.
consumerism, 2, 100, 123.
creationism, 29, 34, 132.
culture of church membership, 11.
culture of churchlessness, 11.
cultures of remembrance, 195–96.
Darwin, Charles, 19.
Diakonie, 8, 174, 176–77.
dialectal materialism, 69.
educational reform, 7, 51, 54, 62, 69.
Eichsfeld, 15, 66–68, 70–76, 80–83, 211, 213.
Einstein, Albert, 26.
self-employment, 15, 97, 110, 114, 118, 214.
apprenticeship, 113, 140.
EOS. See highschool
Erweiterte Oberschule. See highschool
Erzgebirge, 15, 64–66, 68–70, 73–74, 77–80, 211.
ethics, 102–3, 119, 122, 149.
evangelization, 120–22, 126, 128.

family tradition, 154.
FDJ (Free German Youth, Freie Deutsche Jugend), 7, 52, 68, 111, 117, 138.
rejection of, 74, 112, 136.
Frauenkirche, Dresden, 192.
freedom of religion. See church-state legal model
Freethinkers, 19, 25.
Freie Hilfe Berlin, 173, 181–82.

gender, 12, 128, 210.
dynamics between generations, 159–61, 164.
older generation, 149, 161.
German Monistenbund. See Monistenbund.
Gorski, Philip S., 24.

habitus, 90, 94, 97, 102–4, 108.
Haeckel, Ernst, 19, 25.
Halbwachs, Maurice, 195–96.
heritage, 150, 152–56, 164, 216.
family heritage, 14, 150, 161.
religious heritage, 97, 150, 162.
highschool, 63, 69–70, 82, 110–11, 117, 140.
history of everyday life, 4, 12, 92, 108–9.
Honecker, Erich, 63.
Honecker, Margot, 81.

and church buildings, 193–5.
East German, 11, 43, 50, 58, 119, 147, 167, 185.
religious, 100, 130, 143, 195.
Islam, 30.

Jehovah’s Witnesses, 6–7, 9, 15, 125–6, 143, 212–13.
Jews, 9, 91.

resistance against, 71–73, 82, 93, 214.
Junge Gemeinde, 6 n. 2, 45, 54.

Kirche von Unten, 174.
labor movement, 26, 64.
Landeskirchliche Gemeinschaft.
See pietism
Lehmann, Theo, 80.
Lepsius, Rainer, 64, 88.
Liebknecht, Karl, 47–48.
Luckmann, Thomas, 22, 150–51, 216.
Luhmann, Niklas, 150, 159, 215.
Luther, Martin, 5, 8, 30, 171.
Luxemburg, Rosa, 47–48.
memory and space, 16, 193–97.
memory politics, 47–48, 57.
middle class, 64, 135.
military service, 45, 74, 111, 136.
pre-military training, 136, 140.
and career consequences, 80, 136, 141.
minority status, 4, 9, 10 n. 3, 83, 107–108, 110, 112, 137, 204, 212.
modernity and religion, 31, 82.
Monday demonstrations, 190.
Monism. See Monistenbund
Mormons, 9.
Müntzer, Thomas, 30.
Muslims, 177 n. 21, 192.
myth, 163.
Bible as, 152–53, 161–62.
founding myth of the GDR, 46.
of community, 163, 216.
Wende as, 180–82, 218.

National Socialism, 3, 43, 54, 57, 62 n. 4, 92.
New Apostolic Church, 9.
new man. See socialist personality
niche society, 114.
Ostwald, Wilhelm, 25

pastoral care, 92.
of children and youth, 76.
of prisoners, 168–69.
Pietism, 70, 111–12.
political prisoners, 171
political repressions. See secularization and state repression
positivism, 25.
power, 14, 61, 88–90, 215.
Protestant Church, 5, 91–92, 171, 211.
and SED, 8–9, 53, 63.
and opposition, 10–11, 77–79, 100, 170–71, 178, 190, 217.

rehabilitation, of ex-offenders, 16, 168, 172, 175–76, 179, 185.
averdicts, 178, 180, 186.
programs, 16, 176–79, 183–84, 218.
in socialism, 168–70, 175.
after socialism, 178–86.
religious field, 90–91, 94–95, 104.
religious holidays, celebration of, 121, 137, 140, 162, 182.
religious minorities, 9, 171 n. 7, 212.
baptism, 155, 160, 162.
school system. See education
science, 20, 24, 27–28, 33, 89, 158.
scientific progress, 27, 89.
scientific worldview, 13, 20, 28, 37, 69, 149.
reception of, 30–32.

secularization, 1–2, 4, 37, 49, 209.
as decline of religious authority, 23, 122.
internal of Protestantism, 3, 11.
and modernization, 3–4.
and rationalization, 3, 21.

and differentiation, 21, 108, 211.
and industrialization, 3, 22.
and market model, 22, 23 n. 4.
and competing worldviews. See conflict of worldviews
as decline of religious practice, 3, 7, 10, 24, 87, 108, 174, 190.
SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany, Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands), 44, 61, 64, 70, 89, 127, 138, 190.
social milieu, 64, 66, 83, 213.
social work, 8, 175
socialist personality, 6–7, 45, 56, 138–39.
socialist school. See education
socialization, 7, 84, 101, 119, 129, 131, 162, 212.

Catholic, 96.
social-moral milieu. See social milieu
space. See memory and space
subsidiarity principle, 175, 177, 185.
symbolic order, 89, 104.
symbolic production, 89–90.
symbolization, process of, 197–98.
teachers, 65–66, 69, 111, 140, 211.
migration to West, 77.
support of Christian pupils, 69, 117–18.
political commitment of, 111.
Tenbruck, Friedrich, 22.
Thälmann, Ernst, 47, 153.
Pioneers, 136, 138.

Ulbricht, Walter, 52.
Universal Stiftung, 179.

values, 95, 107, 119, 123, 158, 178, 180, 186.
Christian, 95–96.
humanist, 16, 119, 184, 186.
socialist, 52, 55, 139, 158, 169–70.


Wende, 9–10, 16, 110, 172–73, 179, 182, 185, 203, 218.
and career, 110, 143.
and education, 63, 143.
and religious freedom, 9–10, 172.
welfare system, 175, 177.
West Germany, 2–3, 5, 8–9, 10 n. 3, 11, 14, 31, 45, 50, 110, 119–21, 167–8, 171–3, 175–6, 183–85, 190, 191 n. 6, 200–201, 203–204.

Wilson, Bryan, 22, 135.

Wissenschaftliche Weltanschauung. See scientific worldview
working class, 76, 89, 110, 135.
workplace, difficulties of Christians at, 7, 15, 65, 99, 118.
religion in the workplace, 107, 120.

youth, 10 n. 3, 45, 65, 68, 69, 74, 135, 142.
youth groups, 65, 154, 156.
Christian youth work, 74, 77–80, 82–84.