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The heartland of Protestant Reformation and the most secularized part of the world. Eastern Germany as a provocation for the Churches.

In the process of preparing this lecture I was thinking about what might be of interest to someone from South Africa, Korea, or any other part of the world, someone with a Christian or even Protestant background, when he or she comes to East Germany, maybe even for the first time. Like some of you, probably. What would I like to tell these visitors about the religiosity and the non-religiosity of this part of Germany, without just reproducing stereotypes or common knowledge, but also without just whistling in the dark. What can I, as someone who has been living here for 17 years now, but who was raised in the West, tell someone who is here for the first time, who might have heard and read something, but who is curious to hear more? Let me add: What can I as a sociologist with some theological background tell you as representatives of Protestant churches worldwide?

Let me begin with 2 spotlights.

Spotlight 1:

A few weeks ago I participated in the 60<sup>th</sup> birthday of an old friend, with whom I studied Theology decades ago. He is a Protestant minister in Hesse like his father used to be. I was sitting next to his sister, and she asked me about my experience in East Germany. She told me that she would have problems living there, because she thinks one cannot trust East Germans. Having no religious background, she said, they have nothing in which their morality or their deeds are anchored, nothing to ultimately prevent them from lying or killing or doing other monstrous things. And she referred to the attacks on refugee homes and to the rallies of rightwing groups as a proof of this assumption. I told her that many of my friends are East Germans, and have been raised here without Christian background. I told her that moral standards have different origins and go beyond Christianity. The conversation soon got frozen.

Spotlight 2:

When I started to work at the University of Leipzig, I was teaching sociology of religion at the Theology Department. In 1999 I gave a seminar that dealt with the millenium. I told the students to go out and conduct interviews in the streets. I forgot what exactly the results of these little pieces of fieldwork were. What I won't forget, however, was one very incidental

result that one of my students produced. He asked several young people at Leipzig central station how they felt about the approaching millennium. At the end he asked them if they would consider themselves rather as Christians or rather as Atheists. One group of young people replied: “neither nor, just normal”. This phrase has become something like a winged word in the research on religion in East Germany, but hardly anybody remembers this young student who came across it.

Neither nor, just normal. Let me start from here with a few ideas.

### **1. East Germany, in religious terms, has to deal with a twofold de-traditionalization**

The phrase “neither nor, just normal” indicates what one might call a twofold process of de-traditionalization: the de-traditionalization of Christianity in this heartland of the reformation, and the de-traditionalization of scientific Atheism in this heartland of German socialism. Both traditions are not completely gone. Both are still influential in parts of the older generations. But they have more or less lost their influence in socializing the younger ones. The tradition of Protestant Reformation is part of the East German history, it is embodied in the rich tradition of Church buildings, in Church choirs, the Church music. And it draws attention as such tradition. The St. Thomas Church in Leipzig is crowded when the Youth Choir is singing the chorals of Johann Sebastian Bach. People from Leipzig as well as tourists, church people as well as those who are alien to the Church. The same holds true here in Halle or in Dresden. Many people engage in the restoration of old church buildings, some of them dating back to the time of the Reformation. May they themselves be Christian or not, they want these buildings to be preserved as the center of a village or a town. The churches are full on Christmas eves. And Protestant schools are very attractive also for parents without Christian background. But the Churches have become largely irrelevant as membership institutions and as institutions where one would practice one’s living creed. At least for the big majority of the population. For almost 80 percent in Saxony, and even more in Saxony-Anhalt or in Berlin-Brandenburg. How did this happen in the heartland of the reformation?

### **2. East Germany has a long and still influential tradition of secularist worldviews**

What we encounter today in East Germany is the result of a long-lasting process of secularization which dates back much further than the communist regime of the DDR. We know from the work of historians that Protestant regions in general are much more secularized than Cath-

olic regions. But here in the middle of Germany the situation is even more complex. Already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century this region – the middle and northern parts of Germany – was much less church oriented than the southern and western parts. Church going, participation in the Holy Communion, both rates were significantly lower than elsewhere. As Lucian Hölscher, a German historian, has put it: the East-West divide in terms of church and religious activities emerged long before the communist regime. It was the heartland of the social democrats, of Freethinkers and other secular movements, of industrial culture. East Germany was in parts unchurched long before the unchurching activities of the communists started. The secularizing impact of National Socialism and of World War II, and the explicitly anti-religious and Atheist communist regime could build on that background.

So it was not a rural soil, like in Russia or Poland, in which the anti-religious activities were planted. It was a context where secular worldviews already had a strong impact. The communists could build on that ground. They attempted to establish a worldview that was explicitly competing with a Christian world view: the so-called "scientific atheism" and – going along with it – a „scientific world view“. Institutions of adult education, like the URANIA, but also the establishment of popular observatories, and the establishment of astronomy as a subject in school not only had the function of spreading scientific knowledge, they also were supposed to create a „scientific worldview“. Science and religion, rationality and religion, were put in an explicitly competitive relationship. I think that this element of the East German secularisation process is very important in terms of the endurance of its effects, since it combines elements of a “cultural war” with the spread of scientific knowledge, and thereby gives church decline and the abandoning of religion the appearance of necessity. This dichotomy is still visible in present day surveys when they compare East and West Germany. Religion is something that is on the side of irrationality and abusive power.

### **3. East Germany has influential secular institutions**

The secularization of East Germany has created its own secular traditions and institutions that successfully compete with Christian institutions. I just mention the two most important examples: Jugendweihe – a coming of age ritual – and secular burials.

Hand in hand with the politics of oppression, in the 1950s competing socialist rituals were established, especially the so-called “Jugendweihe” as a counterpart to the Protestant rite of passage, the confirmation. For the SED, the introduction of this rite was a central element in the struggle for the young generation. Taken from older secular traditions, it was reintroduced

everywhere in the GDR in order to reduce participation rates in confirmation. Only five years after its introduction in 1954-55, the Jugendweihe had made its way. In 1960, already two-thirds of juveniles participated in it, some of them in addition to the confirmation ritual and some as a substitute for it. Whereas at its outset the introduction of the Jugendweihe was accompanied by strong repression and the ritual itself was accompanied by strong ideological indoctrination and anti-church polemic, over the course of time it increasingly became a rite of passage that focussed on issues of practical life guidance, with principal ideological issues kept in the background.

And it did not decline after the end of the political regime. If you go today to a store to buy a greeting card for Protestant confirmation, you will find 10 cards for Jugendweihe, but only one for confirmation.

The second example is the burial. The burial has long been the domain of the churches, it was hardly contested. People may not have gone to church service on Sundays, they may not have participated in the Holy Communion. But they wanted to have a Christian burial. This is over. In a part of Germany where only 20 Percent or even less are church members it is no surprise that the Christian burial has lost its dominance. However, what is striking, is that around 45 Percent of East Germans decide to have an anonymous burial. A burial where the exact place of the grave may be unknown or which at least does not indicate whose remnants are buried underneath the lawn or in the forest. A place of burial for which no relatives have to take care and which indicates no individual history of the dead person.

The prevalence of this type of burial is much stronger in the East than in the West, and it is directly linked to the degree of secularization. The lower the church membership rate, the higher the rate of anonymous burials. But also: Protestant regions have higher rates of anonymous burials than Catholic regions. The reasons for such a choice are various. People may be explicit Atheists or they may have no connection with the churches. But they may also consider themselves spiritual, but not religious. Some may hate the church, others may like the idea that they go back into nature when their ashes are buried under a tree. Or they may just not have relatives to take care for their grave or may not want to be a burden for their relatives.

But the anonymous burial has become a secular institution which successfully competes with what previously was the sturdiest bastion of the churches: the Christian funeral. It is, by the way, also growing in the West. And the churches, after first attempts to scandalize the practice, in the meantime have tried to include it into their own repertoire.

#### **4. Spiritual curiosity among the younger East Germans**

What some observers, mainly from within the churches, expected to happen after German reunification, obviously was not the case: namely that sects and obscure religious movements would come and overflow East Germans, who were considered being dried out and thirsty for religious offers, but not able to judge them. Religious groups – like Mormons from the United States – came and developed missionary activities, but with modest success. Some evangelical movements were more successful, and they created some concerns on the side of the Protestant churches. But in terms of numbers, even this was not very relevant.

However, if you have a look at the younger age groups, there are some interesting developments in the direction of what I would call spiritual curiosity or maybe even agnostic spirituality.

While the church affiliation and religiosity of the older age groups is constantly declining, recent general social surveys indicate that the younger respondents are growing more open to religious issues, in particular, an increasing number of them believe in life after death. In 2001, for example, twice as many respondents between 18 and 29 years of age supported the belief in afterlife than did 10 years before. In 2001, one-third – 33.6 percent – of these respondents supported such a belief. Surprisingly, this percentage was even higher than among the oldest generation, their grandparents, many who have maintained their church ties. This effect is still visible in recent surveys.

Clearly the result is complex if we consider different indicators of religiosity among different age-groups. The oldest age-group showed the highest levels of church membership and of belief in God – traditional measures of religiosity – but the youngest age-group showed the highest level (and the largest increase) of belief in afterlife. The results were similar for questions on the subjective relevance of magic, spiritualism, and the occult.

Using these two variables as indicators of religiosity, the youngest age-group would be the most religious in East Germany, even more religious than their grandparents. This finding contradicts the normal pattern: The younger the people, the less religious they usually are.

This contradiction casts an interesting light on generational relations and their effects on religiosity. The youngest age-group seems to bring a new dynamic to the field of religiosity and worldviews, operating outside the traditional patterns of church-bound religiosity.

I found strong evidence for that in a research project in which we conducted family interviews

among East German families. In the end of these interviews we were asking the families what they think might happen after death. It was evident that the traditional language of the afterlife was lost even among Christian families. But there was an intense productivity especially among the younger respondents in imagining ideas of what would remain after one's death, ideas of the soul, of personal immortality, of energy that was preserved. Syncretistic and experimental as they are, these ideas do not rely on traditional stocks of religious knowledge. And their semantics, without the anchor of a traditional religious institution or other stable community organization, remain chronically unstable. However, they do articulate a certain openness to religious questions, bringing something new into play that is different from the materialism of the GDR, at the same time it uses this materialism as a starting point.

## **5. Disembedded Religion**

Let me add a final point to what I have just called agnostic spirituality. I call it disembedded religion. I mean a reference to religion that is independent from religious institutions, that is enacted in public, that uses religious symbols eclectically and that merges with a political agenda. We experience this in many places of Germany, but it finds strong support in Saxony and other East Germany regions. Right wing movements use an Anti-Islamic, Save the Occident rhetoric; their followers show crosses with the colours of the German national flag during their rallies. These movements in the streets – Pediga and others – and the party AfD (Alternative for Germany) as their political arm with great success in recent elections are certainly not religious movements. But their negative reference to Islam as a threat to the Occident serves as a uniting formula for those who feel their homeland, their values and maybe also their personal value is threatened by the changes of globalization. Christian groups have started to form their own circles within these movements. They are strongly opposed by the official representatives of the Churches. But nevertheless they successfully use religion as a point of reference that helps to unite and helps to draw boundaries to the outside.

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