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Religious Instruction in East Germany: Reflecting on the “Secular” World¹

In June 1991 the last meeting of the East German Commission for Church Work with Children and Youth, an organization originally set up within the federation of Protestant churches in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) to observe and reflect on church and state educational activities, was held. A discussion between Raimund Hoenen, a professor of Protestant theology at the church university in Naumburg (East) who had fostered longstanding contacts with the West, and Götz Doyé, secretary of the same commission, clearly exhibits the differing positions regarding the introduction of religious instruction in the public schools in the Eastern part of Germany following the country’s unification in 1990. Here’s a brief extract of their conversation:

Hoenen: “I think that Christianity’s great work is both possible and necessary. I’m neither ready to accept the reality conferred upon us by the forty years of the GDR nor the status quo. We were put in a corner on the *weltanschauung* level. For this reason, I don’t want any law that would legitimize this status quo.”

Doyé: “I’d like to know what you mean by that? Are we a Christian society?”

Hoenen: “Yes, that’s what I’d say! That’s what we’ll see!” (N.N. 1991: 510).

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When, in the wake of political unification, the churches unified and re-established their structures in the 1990s, debates emerged over the public role the churches should play in the new Republic. No other issue proved as controversial for both Protestants and Catholics, the country’s two main denominations. If everything seemed possible after the party-state had wound itself up, the discussions were constrained by the country’s unification. The treaty sealing the German question foresaw the transfer of the West German institutions to the East. Where no religious instruction was allowed in schools, Article 7 of the Basic Law, the Federal Republic’s constitution, guaranteed confessional instruction as part of the curriculum—an instruction provided in accordance with church tenets under the supervision of the state.²

Yet Doyé’s comment hints at resistance, which did not come to an end with the Treaty of unification in 1990 but instead endured well into the mid 1990s in the debates, and led eventually to the federal states’

constitutions.³ The discussion at the last meeting of the East German Commission for Church Work with Children and Youth showcases the arguments advanced by both the advocates of the western model and the defenders of the “East German status quo,” which are the central focus of this article. Doyé’s remark, because he vehemently rejects the provisions of the Basic Law and the role it confers on the church, is at first surprising. Why refuse the privileges granted by the Basic Law? Besides different theological traditions and trends coexisting within German Protestantism and Catholicism, the treatment of this issue inevitably brings up the experience under communism and the churches’ reflection on their place in the

dechristianized setting of East Germany, one of the most secularized regions in Europe. The review of the arguments advanced in the debate illustrates how the concept of secularization, whether used as description, experience, or theoretical argument, comes to play a central role in debates over religious instruction. Indeed, a glimpse at the dispute suffices to affirm that it opposes two conflicting readings of modern secularity that pertain to the churches' role as minority organizations and their determination—or indeed unwillingness—to cooperate with school authorities.

In the following article I first provide a historical account of the containment of religious instruction in the former GDR and the development of new practices within the small Catholic Church and the historically more dominant Protestant churches. This exercise is important because it attests to new forms of religious transmission outside the school, which were later advocated for in the 1990s. Using church and theological publications as well as interviews I then describe church actors' patterns of argumentation in the debate over religious instruction. After covering the period immediately following the demise of the party-state, I move on to the time span starting with German unification and ending with the introduction of a new school subject. [4](#) In so doing, I will delineate “church models,” which Protestants and Catholics in East (and West) sought to promote after German unification.

1. The Eradication of Religion from Schools

Education was deemed the seminal instrument for instituting socialism and molding the “new man.” It was at the very core of the Communist party's project. It is not surprising therefore, that education was the area where the communist elite had been most ardent in repelling religion. The implementation of the 1946 law on the “democratization of the German school” allowed the party-state to establish a monopoly in education that was soon extended to the whole youth sector. [5](#) The churches were given no say whatsoever on education (Blühm and Onnasch 1993: 174). Kindergartens and youth homes were contemplated as part of the state's education mandate and were, therefore, transferred to the Ministry of Education. [6](#) Barring a few exceptions, confessional schools were closed, re-orientated, or reassigned to the Ministry of Education, as were most church-operated kindergartens, child and youth homes. [7](#)

Religion was not only banned from schools; the education system was to serve as a device to eradicate religion from society. Teachers were notoriously hostile to religion and its carriers. The school constituted the epicenter of the party-state propaganda, as the arena where Marxism-Leninism was professed. Parallel church activities were, at the outset of the GDR, curtailed through repression. Later, repression was to be replaced by bureaucratic harassment and discriminatory practices. [8](#) The party-state was overtly successful at eradicating a church presence in public education, effectively breaking “religion as a chain of memory” (Hervieu-Léger 2000) and, in turn, impeding the reproduction of religion. Indeed, the Protestant churches' membership dropped from 81.5 percent of the population in 1946 to 20.7 percent at the beginning of the 1990s (EKD 2005: 7). Catholics, a minority in the eastern territories ever since the founding of the first German national state, accounted in the early 1990s for only between two and six percent of the population depending on the sources. These figures contrasted sharply with church membership in western Germany, which was generally estimated at some 80 percent. [9](#)

In spite of the political agenda, the right to provide religious instruction in schools as well as the right of parents over the upbringing of children was included in the first Constitution of the GDR, echoing the Constitution of the Weimar Republic. [10](#) During the process of drafting a constitution at Weimar, the social democrats strongly advocated for secular schools, but as a compromise with other political parties and Christians within their own ranks, religious instruction in schools was allowed (Helmreich 1959: 103 ff.). Provisions in the GDR's first Constitution and the constitutions of the federal states allowed religious instruction to take place in schoolrooms in the afternoons after class, [11](#) a practice that continued throughout the 1950s. Instruction was, however, subject to increased bureaucratic control. Decrees issued in

1956 and 1958 placed restrictions on religious instruction: it had to take place at least two hours after regular classes; it required teachers of religion to be committed to the political system of the GDR and to regularly seek authorization to teach from the school authorities; content of religious instruction was to be subject to strict school control; announcement of the instruction was prohibited in schools; and instruction was limited to primary schools (Mehrle 1998: 171; Pilvousek 1994: 28). As school authorities started to interfere with the churches' programs and contents, some teachers started to give their lessons outside of the school. In this way, religious instruction gradually moved away from the schools and became anchored in the church environment. By the time the 1968 constitution made the official declaration of the separation of church and state, religion had already completely disappeared from the schools. [12](#)

2. The Containment of Churches within the Parish

The party-state's policy of containment coincided with a new trend within the churches. The parish (and the family) acquired a new dimension for Catholics and Protestants. [13](#) As early as the 1950s, forms of religious instruction, apart from school instruction and instruction by clergymen in preparation for the sacraments, had been developed to reach children in the GDR. The Catholics established weekly catechism classes that took place either in a church building or the home of a Catholic family. [14](#) The catechetical instruction was, as Friemel observes, close to community life, the liturgy, and the church calendar (1993: 22). However, it upheld the label "religious instruction," reminiscent of the "people's church" (*Volkskirche*). In addition to the catechetical instruction, other forms of instruction were established in the 1950s. "Religious weeks" took place during school holidays and gathered children who were otherwise difficult to reach; special lessons also brought together pre-school children at regular meetings in the parish. These activities were religious in content and directed toward baptized children, although not exclusively (Friemel 1993). [15](#) They were also generally provided by women and were coordinated by a group of catechists from the dioceses. They depended on the financial and logistic support of Caritas and sister dioceses in the West (Friemel 1993; Lange and Pruss 1996). As with other domains of activity, the various forms of religious instruction had to be approved by the Bishops' Conference and were under their authority (see the various texts reproduced in Pilvousek 1994).

A glimpse at the protocols of the Bishops' Conference suffices to ascertain that the pastoral care of children and youth was of prime importance. Education in schools was certainly the issue that the Catholic bishops were most vocal about in their otherwise rare official declarations. On several occasions, church leadership petitioned the state to respect constitutionally enshrined rights and encouraged parents to make use of them (see notably the pastoral letter from 17 November 1974 "On Christian Education" reproduced in Lange et al. 1993: 257 ff.). In addition to freedom of worship and conscience, parents' rights to raise children, a right decreed by the socialists at Weimar, was deemed a basic human right. Education constituted perhaps the most important battlefield between church and state. The organization of schools had been the concern of debate at numerous constitutional discussions in German history (see Zippelius 1994). Traditionally, the Catholic Church claimed exclusive authority in regulating the religious and moral conduct of its faithful (Spotts 1973: 271). In the GDR, the episcopacy of the small church rejected the legitimacy of the party-state and, in accordance with its line of "political abstinence" (Thériault 2004: 21 ff.), advocated the separation of church and state. This amounted to a retreat in the parishes.

The Protestants had also developed their own weekly confessional instruction in the parish: the *Christenlehre*. [16](#) It was provided by church employees. Drawing on the spirit and the experiences of the "Confessing Church" during the Third Reich, the new teaching plans made large use of the Bible and the hymnbook and focused on preparation for taking the sacraments (Blühm and Onnasch 1993: 176). In the 1950s, participation in the *Christenlehre* was high, though it dwindled with the repressive measures imposed on youth parishes and especially after the introduction of a socialist civil consecration ceremony (*Jugendweihe*). Similarly, the number of church employees declined, causing difficulties especially in the rural areas. [17](#) New forms of instruction were introduced during the 1960s to replace purely confessional instruction. This was reinforced by the 1977 "General Plan on Church Work with Children and Youth (Confirmants)" (reproduced in Reiher 1992b: 120-129). Over time, the number of children in the *Christenlehre* without church affiliation increased considerably, although the instruction remained marginal in terms of percentage of the population (Blühm and Onnasch 1993: 180). "Religious weeks" were also organized as well as children's and youth conventions (Wensierski 1982: 244). These activities were not

limited to parishioners and were not solely religious in nature. Echoing church peace activities, Wensierski mentions that young people were not always interested in the religious component of the church (1982: 272).

The Protestant churches showed more openness toward the state than their Catholic counterpart. The previously mentioned Commission for Church Work with Children and Youth was set up to reflect church educational activities. The Protestant Church showed a readiness to work in schools and sought dialogue with state authorities on matters of education (Degen 1991: 21). Arguing that a dialogue would infringe upon the separation between church and state, the party-state maintained a hard line. A meeting nonetheless took place in 1953 which, in fact, turned out to be largely unsuccessful from the vantage point of the churches. At a second meeting in 1958, the churches complained of the discrimination against Christians in schools (Blühm and Onnasch 1993: 182). Despite the normalization of relations between church and state at the end of the 1970s, the party-state did not revise its position. The state's rebuff did not deter the Protestant churches from voicing their opinions on educational matters, as the proposed concept for an "education to peace" and an analysis of schoolbooks bear witness (see Aldebert 1990: 195 ff.). The churches' synods also frequently expressed concern during the 1980s on the troublesome situation in schools (Reiher 1991: 245). But it was only in November 1989, in the midst of popular upheaval, that the state showed any willingness to enter negotiations.

3. The Demise of State Socialism and School Reform Projects

"Protestants were on the whole more reticent towards the western model than Catholics—though Catholics have de facto retained some of their structures because of the lack of students."

In the aftermath of the 1989 "peaceful revolution," the previously mentioned Protestant Commission on Church Work with Children and Youth called for a renewed school in which it was willing to engage in critical cooperation with authorities and take up responsibility (N.N. 1991: 505). In the meantime, Protestants advanced a series of proposals. While some argued that religious issues should be included with different subjects (German, History, and new subjects such as civic instruction and social studies) [18](#) and through projects or periodic courses, others advocated for the neutral instruction of religion for all students in conjunction with catechetical instruction in the parishes (Doyé in Schwerin 1990: 364). These proposals were not mutually exclusive, but they all denied the viability of the extension of the West German model to the East which was seen to segregate youth, isolate the religious issue, and ostracize Christians (Reiher and Doyé in Mehrle 1998:176). Summing up the situation, Doyé, secretary of the Commission on Church Work with Children and Youth, wrote in April

1990:

"It is not possible to predict future developments, but I think we should do everything we can to keep the *Christenlehre* as an important dimension of parish life. In schools, we could perhaps introduce a subject such as Ethics/Norms. This would address the basic questions of life" (quoted in Mehrle 1998:177).

In any case, it was argued that the school should meet the need to deal with ethical and religious issues and provide information on the origins of the common cultural tradition.

And the Catholic Church? In its first declaration, the Catholic Bishops' Conference appealed for a thorough reform of the school system. Again, the right of parents over the upbringing of children was reiterated. Above all, a "de-ideologization" of the school was sought in order to end discrimination against Christians. Interestingly, no mention was made of religious instruction (Lange et al. 1993: 394). Moreover, the newly founded Catholic lay organization in the GDR petitioned for the right to set up confessional private schools as well as the recognition and financing of church kindergartens and children's homes (Lange et al. 1993: 398-399). In an interview from May 1990, Hans-Joachim Meyer, president of the

Catholic lay organization and Minister for Education and Science in the GDR, pronounced himself in favor of religious instruction in public schools, but not using the West German model. Instead, he saw the 1949 Constitution of the GDR as providing the framework for religious instruction (in Domszen 1997:179). ¹⁹ Finally, the association of East German catechists favored an option analogous to what eventually became known as the “Protestant solution”: the continuation of parish activities combined with civic instruction for all children and, possibly, religious instruction (Simon 1993: 120). The period of broad reflection on the renewal of education characteristic of the *Wende*, the political turn of 1989, came to an end with the decision to proceed with German unification through “institutional transfer.” Article 23 of the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was used to extend the institutions of the FRG to the territory of the former GDR. ²⁰ From then on unification set the parameters of discussion: it provoked two stances, either for or against western-style religious instruction. In the next section, I present Protestant and Catholic exponents of both positions respectively.

4. After German Unification

4.1 The Defenders of the “East German Status Quo”

As Doyé’s remark in the dialogue cited at the outset paradigmatically suggests, defenders of what became known as the “East German status quo” made pleas for caution in making any reforms related to religious instruction in schools. This stand was largely represented by Protestants, particularly among the traditionally more “progressive” church people. Religious organizations on the territory of the former GDR have, they unremittingly recalled, a very small population base. This situation, they added, did not change when the repression and the discrimination of the party-state came to an end. If public acceptance of the churches was admittedly high at the end of the 1980s when the churches challenged the regime through involvement with opposition groups and through the beginning of the 1990s, it was not reflected in higher membership. Engaging in reforms such as the introduction of a western-style religious instruction in schools would, it was argued, be opportunistic and counterproductive as the churches would lose the credibility they had gained.

According to the defenders of the East German status quo, the atheism promoted by the Communist party and its hostile policy toward churches had combined with the “forces of modernization” to secularize East German society (Schorlemmer 1999: 186). In short, the churches no longer enjoyed the monopoly situation of previous days; on the contrary, they occupied a minority position as one type of organization among others—a situation thought to pertain to East Germany but also seen as an irreversible phenomenon the churches were impotent to modify. Following arguments also made in academic discussions, the Protestant defenders of the status quo typically emphasized that the churches could no longer be contemplated as the main vectors of values (Doyé 1991: 309).

Defenders of the status quo believed that religious instruction ought to be integrated into the community, the locus of religious life. The methods developed in the GDR had, it was contended, withstood the test of time and proven their worth as the most apt form of transmission of the faith (Milker in N.N. 1991: 329; Reiher 1992a). In making their claim, defenders of the status quo stressed how qualified church employees were in their work with the children of the diaspora as well as the voluntary, accessible, independent, and critical nature of the churches’ activity. Furthermore, the experiences of the GDR, it was argued, symbolized a turning point in the history of German Protestantism. Heino Falcke, provost in Erfurt, thus observed that the cultural and religious symbiosis between church, society, and the state had ended during the GDR (1997: 101). As religious and ethical issues had to be dealt with, religious instruction in the parishes should be continued. However, the introduction of religious instruction as part of the regular curriculum in state schools was strongly criticized as it was deemed futile in the East German setting and, what’s more, outdated.

Following this analysis of the situation, the frame laid out in the Basic Law—and by extension, the principles of a people’s church—was deemed an atavistic, even regressive, model. Against the prospect of unification, several disenchanted pastors uttered the critique: “We’re returning to the people’s church!” Educational specialists—in East, but also in West Germany—saw confessional religious instruction as practiced in the West as anachronistic (Otto 1992). Roland Degen, a member of the Commission on Church Work with Children and Youth, said its adoption would be grotesque as it would inevitably drive a

wedge between Catholics and Protestants that had ostensibly been overcome at the ecumenical meetings of the “Conciliar process” in the 1980s (in N.N. 1991: 510). Defenders of the status quo recalled that confessional instruction as practiced in West Germany was an exception in Europe (Doyé in Schwerin 1990: 634). They contended that their reasoning was not limited to East Germany, but applied to West Germany as well.

By way of example, Renate Höppner, a pastor in Magdeburg, claimed that the situation in the West was analogous to the situation in the East. According to her, “This is still hidden in the West due to much better finances.” [21](#) In addition, she commented that religious instruction in West Germany was not what it pretended to be; it corresponded more to interconfessional instruction on ethical and religious issues than to genuine religious instruction (see also Doyé 1991: 310). Given the situation, Höppner deplored the lack of honest discussion, and called for an open discussion. Theologians in the West have also pointed out that the practice has been in crisis for many years (for example, Besier 1996: 7). In short, defenders of the East German status quo upheld principles developed in the GDR and demanded a general reform in keeping with that reality.

The guardians of the East German status quo not only stated that attempts at Christianization were bound to be ineffectual, but that engaging in reform could be interpreted as a rent-seeking behavior. They dreaded having religious instruction labeled as a form of “black instruction in state ideology” [*schwarze Staatsbürgerkunde*] (see Domsgen 1998:188; Hanisch and Pollack 1997), a device of the new regime substituting for the Communist party and its ideological apparatus. It was therefore argued that reform should be carried out with extreme caution (Falcke 1991: 90). They also feared that the introduction of religious instruction in the schools might have negative consequences on the voluntary nature of the instruction and exert pressure for a “winning option.” Parents might feel they have to accommodate a new power. Ruth Misselwitz, a pastor in Berlin, vividly expressed this argument in an interview: [22](#)

In the eyes of the communists, we were the real class enemy... And then, religious education was to be introduced in schools immediately after the *Wende* ... I have met parents here, in the schools shortly after the *Wende*, while they were filling in school registration forms... there was the question: religious education? Yes or no. Of course, they chose religious education. Their argument was: ‘well, we won’t spoil our children’s prospects for the future.... What was once the pioneer organization is today religious education!’ So, I went up to them and said: ‘listen now, it’s not like that at all. Religious instruction shouldn’t be selected for career reasons, but out of conviction.’ I have almost tried to convince parents not to register their children in religious education because it should not be equated with... the pioneer organization... because the subject of ‘religion’ is for me simply too valuable and important to be defamed in such a way, [it ought] to be fought for.

Misselwitz pointed out that reform could curb the right of parents and children to make free decisions and impinge on the voluntary nature of the activities. In a similar vein, Bishop Demke, a leading eastern figure, asserted that one of the strengths of the *Christenlehre* and other church activities for youth in the parishes was that it attracted both Christians and non-Christians. [23](#) Defenders of the East German status quo further argued that the introduction of confessional religious instruction in the schools and cooperation with school authorities—and by extension the state—would be detrimental to the organization’s independence and, in turn, its critical status. Klaus Gaber, a politician from the Green/Alliance 90’ party in Saxony, paradigmatically pointed out: “I have co-operated with church grassroots groups over many years. There, I have experienced how difficult but also how helpful and enriching it was that the church was separated from the state and faced up to it with criticism. I... am afraid of the church developing a close relation to the state or even becoming a state church” (quoted in Mehrle 1998: 196).

Another line of argumentation, which could be referred to as the “dictate of reason,” also proved to be a powerful weapon for the defenders of the status quo. Accordingly, it was argued that the low number of Christians in the East made the introduction of religious instruction as stipulated in the Basic Law unjustifiable. Proponents of the status quo argued that the conditions to offer religious instruction in the schools could not be met: there were simply not enough children interested in taking this class. Other reasons were also given: there were not enough teachers for all of the schools; and they could not ensure a solid enough presence in the schools to be taken seriously by other staff. It was therefore seen as impossible to reach all Christians through schools, especially in rural areas. As a curriculum course, it would

also be hard to grade students and measure a child's religious advancement. In addition, many church employees and pastors objected to religious instruction in the school and would refuse to partake in the program. [24](#) Most parents and their children, indeed the population as a whole, were skeptical of religion and ideologies (Degen 1991: 29; Stock 1991: 22). Finally, providing instruction in schools and in the parish would put too much strain on pastors. In brief, defenders of the status quo presented an inventory of all the problems the introduction of religious instruction in schools could possibly bring with it.

While acknowledging the necessity of change, Catholic proponents of the status quo also stressed the dangers of losing their catechetical instruction as well as other pastoral activities such as the pastoral care of the youth and family circles (B.S. 1993: 86; Simon 1992: 86). After the radical political change, it was generally considered that the introduction of western-style religious instruction would represent a threat to the central place of the parish as locus of religious life and continuity.

Annegret Beck, an employee of the school board of the Erfurt diocese, reported a recurrent statement voiced by lay members of the church: "For Christians in these communities, parishes remained a 'roomy niche', a place of continuity which—in contrast to all other areas of life—did not have to undergo fundamental change" (1994: 28). Catholics who after the political change of 1989 generally advocated reforms in other domains of cooperation with the state expressed skepticism concerning the introduction of religious instruction as part of the regular school curriculum. Anticipating the argument that religious instruction in the schools would attract more people and give more freedom for catechetical instruction (Meyer 1999), they claimed that school religious instruction would leave children with neither the time nor the interest to engage in parish-based religious activities (Beck 1994: 64-65). By the same token, they maintained that the teachers would have little time or energy after their schoolwork to invest in the parish (Beck 1994: 76). Along the same lines, many defenders of the status quo contended that if the many organizations administered by Catholics in the West were transferred to the East, they could sap the strength of active Catholics and erode the foundations of the community. In stressing the importance of parish activities, Bishop Wanke of Erfurt (2000: 127) came to the same conclusion. He inferred a positive correlation between the separation of church and state and the degree of motivation and innovation of the catechists—an opinion for which theorists of a utilitarian sociology of religion would probably credit the bishop with a good deal of sociological instinct.

Advocates of the status quo all pronounced themselves against the introduction of religious instruction as stated in the Basic Law. Given the minority situation in eastern Germany and, more generally, the dynamics of secularization, the transmission of the faith was seen necessarily to have to take place in the parish. One Protestant church official, Falcke, asserted that "It [religious instruction] should not derive from a partnership between church and state with a theory of religion that conceives of Christianity as the religion of society which takes on an integrative, value-imparting function for society as a whole" (1991: 89). Against a perception of the West-German model of church and state, the Protestants thus stressed the *voluntary* nature of religious instruction as essential. Catholics otherwise more likely to embrace changes brought about by German unification showed reticence regarding the introduction of religious instruction in schools. If there was a widespread feeling that something had to be done in the schools, they argued it would jeopardize what was considered "the positive experiences" of the GDR in developing parochial structures. While stressing different aspects, both Protestant and Catholic defenders of the status quo infused value onto the experiences had during the GDR.

4.2 The Proponents of Western-Style Reforms

On a more pragmatic note, defenders of the status quo, both Protestants and Catholics, also preached realism: they contended that the churches' minority situation made the introduction of western-style religious instruction in state schools untenable. Advocates of reform, such as the Protestant theologian Raimund Hoenen, retorted optimistically, rebuffing their opponents' arguments by maintaining that the number of people declaring church affiliation was not as central to the issue as defenders of the status quo liked to pretend. Hoenen warned against accepting the status quo imposed by the former party-state and stressed the strengths of Christianity. In promoting the introduction of western-style religious instruction, both Protestant and Catholic advocates of reform challenged the alleged effects and sources of secularization and in this way conferred power on religious actors as well as a public role on religion. [25](#)

Norbert Joklitschke, a Catholic priest in Brandenburg, asserted that Christians were an important minority as “carriers of tradition” (1993: 268). Christianity was seen as part of the western heritage and the source of modern values—Feiereis, a Catholic theologian from Erfurt, speaks of Christianity as society’s “intellectual and cultural foundation” (1997). In this vein, the connection between democracy and Christianity was also stressed (Tiefensee 1998: 188). To put it succinctly, the reformers claimed that “the Christian churches were not sects.” [26](#) Following this logic, the small number of Christians in East Germany was not seen to reflect a rejection of Christianity (see Rendtorff in Aldebert 1990: 36; Neubert 2000; Tiefensee 2000). Because of the secularization promoted by the party-state, it was contended that most East Germans never had a chance to be acquainted with Christianity. Secularization, Neubert points out, is the legacy of the party-state’s policy: “empirical findings show that East German aconfessionalism [*Konfessionslosigkeit*] is primarily the result of the SED’s [the Communist Party] policy on church and religion” (2000: 377). The fact that a majority of East Germans professed no religious confession made them perhaps religiously “unmusical”, [27](#) though not necessarily areligious (Tiefensee 2000).

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Reformers, Catholics in particular, exhibited optimism and faith in the future. They greeted the opportunities that came with the demise of state socialism and German unification with enthusiasm. Several advocates of reform spoke of the “gift of unification” [28](#) and East Germany was depicted as a “land of opportunities.” Religious instruction was the chance to be the “church for others” (Baldermann 1990: 360; Ratzmann 1991) and a chance for mission work (Reinelt 1994: 4 f.). It represented the opportunity to undo the acts of an illegitimate regime. Indeed, it was imperative, it was argued, to lift the many discriminations imposed over forty years and restore the role of Christianity as a legitimate constituent of society (Hoenen in Beck 1994: 85; N.N. 1991; Neubert 2000). From this viewpoint, the churches could be regarded as advocates of the spiritual, the “professional guardians of the sacred” whose duty for society as a whole is, as Beck put it, “to bring the religious dimension intrinsic to man to the public” (1994: 86). [29](#)

The reformers advised the church to seize the opportunity and favor the model adopted by most West German federal states. Several arguments were invoked. They reasoned that instruction as part of the school schedule would give many different people access to religion, some without any church affiliation. As Friemel, a theologian and pedagogue from Erfurt, put it in an interview: “We get the ‘good Catholics’ anyway.” [30](#) They felt that once they were in the schools, religion and its carriers would gradually become more accepted. Beck wrote that once children, parents, and teachers have had experience with the instruction, they are generally satisfied (Beck 1994: 49; Reinelt 1994). Advocates of reform also argued that the model had proven its worth in minority situations in the West in places like Hamburg, Bremen, Berlin, Schleswig-Holstein, and parts of Lower Saxony (Beck 1994; Friemel 1992).

Reformers countered arguments that religious instruction is not voluntary, is uncritical and serves the interest of the church. While being accessible to all, the instruction remains voluntary as students can opt out and take civic instruction instead. Baldermann, a western Protestant pedagogue, claimed that religious instruction is not indoctrination, but critical—the Bible being *per se* a critical instance (1990: 360). As Balderman writes, “Those against the instruction have not experienced it at close quarters; it is not what they think” (1992: 215). For his part, Friemel claimed that religious instruction is immune to ideology and states: “Whoever places Marxist-Leninist ideology on the same level as religion has misunderstood some basic ideas and should attend religious instruction where it can be learned” (1992: 29).

To make their case, proponents of reform reminded their skeptical interlocutors that the GDR was not an easy place for Christians. They were unable to pursue their activities as they wished. For this reason, they

advised against idealizing the experiences of the GDR (Beck 1994; Tiefensee 1998) and urged that the pastoral activities that were developed under the dictatorial state be seen as temporary solutions (Hoenen in Beck 1994: 64; N.N. 1991). Rainer Eppelmann, a pastor and Christian Democrat MP, admonished defenders of the status quo not to legalize the SED policy of de-Christianization (N.N. 1996). Reformers criticized some church officials for having accepted and even promoted secularization (Hoenen in N.N. 1991; Neubert 2000). Tiefensee also complained that the churches had given up on religion as “they do not fight for it” (1998: 188). He invoked the possible backlashes when he claimed, “In order not to become a sect, one tends *nolens volens* to mutate into a sect” (also Meier 1992: 183; Tiefensee 1998:188).

Advocates of reform took great pains to show the relevance of religious instruction. They claimed that new and old reforms support each other. For example, the head of the German Bishops’ Conference, Bishop Lehmann of Mainz, spoke of a “necessary complement” (in N.N. 1991: 509). Moreover, with the introduction of religious instruction as part of the school curriculum, catechetical instruction could concentrate on activities of a genuinely religious nature (Beck 1994: 84; Friemel 1992: 30). Advocates of reform also stressed the positive effect of confronting plurality and the need to meet the demand. They argued that the proponents of the status quo should not fear the new situation and run away. Conceding that the status quo might, at first blush, seem attractive, Friemel enumerated a number of arguments in favor of reform:

Is the church interested in religious instruction as part of the curriculum in the renewed school? Without much thought, the immediate answer may be: In God’s name no! The justification is as follows: parish catechetical instruction has worked well. Parish communities and their catechetical instructors wish to retain it and develop it freely in the new context. But with a little hesitation and consultation with western religion pedagogues before answering, it may seem that an immediate rejection may lead to missed opportunities for not only would ‘religious instruction’ become part of the school curriculum, but also instructors attain a new status, that of teachers of religion. Universities would also have to create chairs in ‘religion and its didactics’. Our society and our school may benefit from this Christian presence.

Conclusion

Reviewing Protestant and Catholic arguments over the controversial issue of religious instruction in schools during the first half of the 1990s, one notices that the religious actors all point to (East) Germany’s secularized setting: either to reject or advocate reforms.

If the head of the small Catholic Church in the territory of the former GDR was more open to reforms, understood here as the transfer of the western legal frame, Fauth (1999: 269) observes that, at least in the case of the Catholic Church in Brandenburg, there was little support for religious instruction in the school beyond the church hierarchy, attesting that the position of the parish as the locus of religious life and transmission of the faith was conferred a high status and had become quite anchored as the hallmark of the “church in the diaspora.” Experiences gained during the GDR and the structures that were then established were seen as worth keeping. Protestants were on the whole more reticent towards the western model than Catholics—though Catholics have de facto retained some of their structures because of the lack of students. [31](#) If Protestant religious instruction was provided both in the classroom and in the parish—with a trend in favor of school instruction, [32](#) defenders of the status quo steadfastly promoted principles and forms of organization development in the GDR and advocated for voluntary activities rather than what was deemed an outdated model: the “people’s church.”

One question guiding this article needs to be put anew: why did parts of the churches not wish to retain the privileges conferred onto them by the Basic Law? Surely confessional traditions between and within the confessions played a role in accounting for patterns of argumentation (see Graf 1992). Peter L. Berger once drew a parallel between certain theological traditions and the options they typically advocate in the face of modern secularity. According to him, the Barthian theologians and the liberal Protestants respectively exhibited a strategy of cognitive bargaining or surrender while the Catholics prior to the Second Vatican Council generally tended to favor a retrenchment by creating a ghetto or promoting a re-conquest (1992: 42-44). Following these ideal-typical strategies, reformers could be said to seek the spiritual *reconquista* of East Germany. For their part, defenders of the status quo would exhibit a form of cognitive retrenchment—an attitude which led reformers such as, for example, Hoenen to criticize some

church officials for having accepted and even promoted secularization (in N.N. 1991).

Reformers also did not fail to point out that not all the structures and concepts developed in the GDR were in large part due to the restraints imposed by the party-state. Admittedly, not all that was gone in the GDR had originally been welcomed. Whether the arguments put forward are actually valid is not relevant here for the status quo had become naturalized and made into the way "things really were." As Rehberg compellingly points out, "Well-founded moral and theoretical dualisms (such as enforcement and agreement) do not take us that far empirically, as coercion may mobilize and lead to agreement and agreements are often based on obligation" (1994: 51). Leaving the critiques formulated in the debates aside, two aspects of the discussions presented come to the fore: particular understandings of the sources and consequences of secularization and the actual development of new church principles in the GDR. The confessional differences and theological trends within confessions no doubt mattered as principles were reinforced—or weakened for that matter—as a result of the experiences during the GDR. But they do not suffice to explain all differences: how could one duly account for the position of Catholic proponents of the status quo in the new context? One needs also to be attentive to the containment of religion and new experiences gained during the GDR, which contributed to shape new conceptions of the churches' role. For when looking at the church domains of activity and the change brought about through the political change of 1989/1990 (see Thériault 2004), the following rule applies: where principles and structures were most anchored in the GDR, more continuity could be observed thereafter.

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¹This article is based on material from my book *'Conservative Revolutionaries': Protestant and Catholic Churches in Germany after Radical Political Change in the 1990s* (Berghahn Books, 2004).

²Article 7 reads as follows: "Religious instruction shall form part of the curriculum in state and municipal schools, with the exception of nondenominational schools. Religious instruction shall, without prejudice to the state's right of supervision, be given according to the principles of the religious denominations. No teacher may against his will be placed under an obligation to give religious instruction." The city-states of Bremen and Berlin derogates from this article.

³As the issue of education falls under the jurisdiction of the federal states, discussions on the form of religious instruction to be offered mainly took place at the state level.

⁴For accounts of interactions of the churches with the state on matters of education, I refer the reader to major works on the subject. For the Protestant churches, Mehrle (1998) and Domsgen (1998) and, for the Catholic Church, see Simon (1992, 1993, 1998, 1999). I will not deal here with this subject. For information on "Forms of Life, Ethic, and Religion" [*Lebensgestaltung, Ethik, Religionskunde* or LER], see Domsgen (1998: 187 ff.), Fauth (1999: 47 ff.), and Mehrle (1998: 207 ff.).

⁵The law stated: "It is the duty of the German democratic schools to educate the youth to be independent and responsible human beings who are able and willing to serve the well-being of the people. The students are to be educated in a truthful democratic spirit of peaceful international cooperation. School education is the competence of the state alone. Private schools of any sort are

forbidden. Religious education is the responsibility of the churches. It can be given with their financial support and by their representatives. Instruction in the public schools is given to boys and girls jointly.”

[6](#)On 20 June 1947, the Soviet authorities ordered the transfer of the administration of youth homes to the Ministry of People’s Education (Jostmeier 1995: 151).

[7](#)A Catholic girl’s school in Berlin, a boarding school in Heiligenstadt as well as traditional Protestant colleges (the Thomasschule in Leipzig, the Kreuzschule in Dresden, and a further school in Schulpforte) received authorization from the Soviets after the war.

[8](#)Blühm estimates that 3,000 high school students and an unknown number of university student members of church organizations were expelled between 1952 and 1953 (1993: 241).

[9](#)According to Werner Simon, between 13 and 16 percent of the young people in the East are members of a Protestant Church while some 4 percent are said to be Catholics (Simon 1998: 563). The number of children taking part in religious instruction at the beginning of the 1990s was estimated at some 20 percent—2 percent in cities (Ritter 1992: 35).

[10](#)The Protestant and Catholic Church leadership had demanded the founding or re-founding of confessional schools on the basis of their historical rights, state constitutions, and the 1933 concordat (Pilvousek 1994: 26). As this process was thought to take some time, they petitioned for interim provisions to make religious instruction part of the regular curriculum.

[11](#)Article 40 of the 1949 constitution reads: “Religious instruction is a concern of the religious associations. The exercise of this right is guaranteed.” This is reiterated in Article 44: “The right of the church to give religious instruction on school premises is guaranteed. Religious instruction is given by personnel selected by the church. No one may be forced to give, or be prevented from giving, religious instruction. Those entitled to bring up a child shall determine whether the latter shall receive religious instruction.”

[12](#)The nomination of Margot Honecker as Minister of Education, combined with a new law on education (1965), brought the process of eradication of religion in the GDR’s schools and the control of the state authorities over the churches to completion.

[13](#)⁸⁰⁰₈₂ The ambivalence between school and parish instruction is illustrated by Frickel when he observes: “The fact that the *Christenlehre* [the weekly confessional instruction in the parish] is to be given in the parish is completely part of their concept, although the loss of the right to teach the *Christenlehre* in the classroom is felt as a burden” (1982: 287).

[14](#)Franz Georg Friemel comments on the 1950s: “There were usually more children of the same age participating in weekly religious instruction than there were at Sunday services. This has to do with the concept of obligatory instruction” (Friemel 1993: 21). However, the number of children participating in instruction gradually decreased.

[15](#)Other, more traditional activities were also organized for children such as choirs and ministrants' preparation.

[16](#)The *Christenlehre* was conceived for seven to twelve year-olds—the younger children were invited to participate in instruction for preschool children while the older ones were encouraged to participate in confirmation classes (Frickel 1982: 286).

[17](#)Aldebert mentions a 66 percent drop in participation from between 1972 and 1984 in Mecklenburg (1990: 193). Participation then stabilized at the beginning of the 1980s and probably increased toward the end of the decade (Pollack 1994: 283).

[18](#)The subject “social studies” (*Gesellschaftskunde*) was introduced to replace instruction in state ideology (*Staatsbürgerkunde*) in 1990.

[19](#)As mentioned above, the 1949 Constitution (Article 44) foresaw the right to give religious instruction on school premises by personnel selected by the church. It further emphasized the voluntary nature of the instruction for teachers and children as well as the parent's right to decide.

[20](#)Another possible alternative, Article 146 of the Basic Law, foresaw the formation of a constitutional assembly and the drafting of a new constitution.

[21](#)Interview conducted by Solange Wydmusch in 2000.

[22](#)Interview conducted by Solange Wydmusch in 2000.

[23](#)Interview conducted by Solange Wydmusch in 2000.

[24](#)A frequently pronounced phrase, as Friemel reports, is that “the GDR is still alive in the schools” (interview with B. Thériault, 1999). At a conference of Protestant religion schoolteachers in 1999, people working in the East bemoaned that their colleagues were inciting children to participate in the civil consecration ceremony (*Jugendweihe*).

[25](#)A prominent Catholic and social democrat MP, Wolfgang Thierse, reiterates this position in his 2000 book entitled *Religion ist keine Privatsache* (“religion is not a private matter”).

[26](#)This was a recurrent aphorism at the 1997 Protestant Church convention in Leipzig.

[27](#)An expression Tiefensee borrows from Max Weber and which can be traced back to Friedrich Schleiermacher.

[28](#)An expression notably used by Franz Georg Friemel, pedagogue and theologian in Erfurt, in an interview conducted by Barbara Thériault in 1999.

[29](#)This position is also officially endorsed by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). For the example of Thuringia, see Thériault (2000) and Colditz (in Mehrle 1998: 195).

[30](#)Interview with Barbara Thériault, 1999.

[31](#)For the most part, instruction is still being carried out on a weekly basis in the parishes, a practice that was developed during the GDR (Simon 1998: 566).

[32](#)As a result, the western model was gradually introduced, but not without the superposition of eastern concepts (Degen in Fauth 1999). One noticeable exception was the legislation passed by the state of Brandenburg, which introduced a new and controversial subject called “Forms of Life, Ethic, and Religion.”

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