

HUMANIST ORGANIZATIONS AND SECULARIZATION IN GERMANY

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ABSTRACT: Among social scientists, humanist and freethinker organizations are often described as secularizing agents within society with a critical and confrontational relation to religions. This article provides a re-evaluation of this theory with respect to a contemporary example of German freigeistig organizations, the German Humanist Association (*Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands* [HVD]). Through being incorporated into German religio-political arrangements, the author argues, the HVD rather imitates religion, thereby unfolding secularization-opposing effects. Drawing on a grounded theory-based analysis of found data as well as interviews and participant observations, and with reference to the comparative frameworks regarding 'multiple secularities' (Burchardt/Wohlrab-Sahr) or 'different modes of nonreligion' (Quack), the article concludes by distinguishing two different types of *freigeistig* organizations in contemporary Germany, only one of which can be described as a secularizing agent.

KEYWORDS: Freethought, Humanism, Nonreligion, Religion and Politics, Secularization.

INTRODUCTION

Humanist and freethinker organizations have been widely neglected by the social and cultural sciences for centuries (exceptions are Budd 1977; Campbell 2013 [1971]; Klimkeit 1971). However, within the past fifteen years, they have become a central issue of Nonreligion and Secularity Studies, a new emerging field within the Study of Religion (see Lee 2012; Quack 2014). Quite a number of studies focus on individual members and their 'conversion to atheism' (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 2006; Bullivant 2015; LeDrew 2013; Mastiaux 2013; Smith 2011). Others are interested in the organizations themselves as collective social agents and analyse their socio-political agenda and function. The majority of the latter group of studies characterizes humanist and freethinker organizations as secularizing agents within society (Campbell 2013 [1971]; Klimkeit 1971; Quack 2012; Schmidt-Lux 2008; Simon-Ritz 1996, 1997; Weir 2006). They highlight the critical and confrontational stance of these organizations towards religion/s and portray them as catalysts of religious decline. This article calls into question this narrative by analysing the agenda and practice of the German Humanist Association (*Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands* [HVD]), a contemporary example of the

organized *freigeistig*¹ spectrum in Germany. The central argument of this paper is that the HVD, by being incorporated into religio-political arrangements in Germany, actually follows a secularization-opposing mode of action. To develop this argument, I will begin by giving a short definition of secularization. Then, I will examine the narrative of secularizing humanist and freethinker organizations within the social sciences, followed by a portrait of the HVD and its incorporation into religio-political arrangements in Germany. I will conclude by suggesting a distinction between two types of *freigeistig* organizations in Germany, only one of which unfolds secularizing effects. Therefore, this article can be considered an empirical contribution to the discussion on ‘multiple secularities’ (Burchardt and Wohlrab-Sahr 2013) and ‘different modes of nonreligion’ (Quack 2014, 451-452).

SECULARIZATION: A SHORT DEFINITION

From the 1960s onwards, the secularization thesis has not only been paradigmatic for social scientific theories of ‘modern’ society (Casanova 1994, 17; Knott 2010, 116-118) but has also become commonplace within ‘Western’ public discourse in general. However, its premises had hardly been laid down systematically (Casanova 1994, 17), and this caused the uncontrolled growth of diverse interpretations of secularization, which are difficult to summarize on a common ground. Generally speaking, the term ‘secularization’ describes a transformation of the role religion/s play/s in ‘modern’ societies, often in the sense of a loss of significance through structural processes of ‘modernization’ (e.g. rationalization, industrialization, technologization, urbanization, democratization, and liberalization of market economy). These transformation processes concerning religion/s apply to different areas of society. Casanova (1994) distinguishes three such processes, which are commonly subsumed under the term ‘secularization’ but which do not necessarily occur together and therefore have to be analysed on their own, as follows: (1) the ‘liberation’ of functionally differentiated segments of society (e.g. politics, economics, and law) from religious norms and institutions on a social macro-level—religion, then, becomes a functionally differentiated area of society itself; (2) the decline of religious belief, practice, and membership; and (3) a process of religious privatization, that is, a drawback of religion/s from the public sphere to private spaces. Social scientists who assume a secularizing function of *freigeistig* organizations usually refer to the second and/or the third meaning of secularization that Casanova describes.

HUMANIST AND FREETHINKER ORGANIZATIONS AND SECULARIZATION

Within the social sciences, the effects humanist and freethinker organizations have on societies have often been described in terms of secularization theory. The organizations appear as secularizing agents with primarily critical and confrontational stances on religion/s. An early example of this paradigm can be found in Colin Campbell’s ‘Sociology of Irreligion’ (2013

¹ The attributive use of the word ‘freigeistig’ has been established by several social scientists (e.g. Fincke 2002; Mastiaux 2013; Weir 2006) to refer to a range of German organizations which are characterized by a naturalist worldview, a challenging stance toward the religious establishment, and a distinctive religion-relatedness (the concept ‘religion-relatedness’ was coined by Quack [2014]): the self-understanding of these groups is constituted within a process of constant preoccupation with religion. This religion-relatedness can have different modes. Apart from critical and confrontational forms there can be dialogue-oriented, cooperative, and imitating forms of religion-relatedness (similar forms were found by Quack et al. forthcoming). English literature often refers to *freigeistig* organizations as ‘freethinkers’ (e.g. Cimino and Smith 2007, 2010; Jacoby 2004). However, the German context is characterized by two different groups of organizations constituting the *freigeistig* scene from nineteenth century onwards: Freethinkers and so-called ‘freereligious’ groups like the Association of Freereligious Congregations in Germany (*Bund Freireligiöser Gemeinden Deutschlands* [BFGD]). Although the latter up until today explicitly refer to themselves as ‘religious’, they share the abovementioned characteristics with the freethinkers. For that reason, the German term ‘freigeistig’ is used to group freethinkers and freereligious groups together and label the organizations in question.

[1971]). Campbell analyses irreligious organizations in Great Britain and the US as catalysts of religious decline and a privatization of religion (Campbell 2013 [1971], 5-7). However, following Campbell, irreligious organizations are not only to be understood as institutions to fight religions but also as their substitutes as a source of moral, meaning, and political orientation (Campbell 2013 [1971], 118-124). Klimkeit (1971), Simon-Ritz (1996, 1997) and Weir (2006), make similar arguments with regard to the Indian and German context.

A systematic elaboration of the secularizing effects of humanist and freethinker organizations is presented by Thomas Schmidt-Lux (2008) in his monograph on the Urania Society of the GDR. Urania was a quasi-public educational institution with an anti-superstitious and at times anti-religious agenda. Schmidt-Lux illustrates the strained confrontations between the scientific *Weltanschauung* of Urania and different Christian players, which, in the end, led to a secularization of GDR society. In doing so, he criticizes attempts to explain secularization through anonymous processes of 'modernization' alone (Schmidt-Lux 2008, 11). Together with Karstein and Wohlrab-Sahr (2008, 2009, 120-198), Schmidt-Lux coins the concept 'secularization as conflict'. Secularization processes, then, can be understood as results of confrontations between various agents (e.g. churches, states, humanist and freethinker organizations, and the media). This understanding of secularization is open and unbiased concerning the results of the respective confrontations, thereby challenging the narrative of an inevitable connection of 'modernization' and secularization (Schmidt-Lux 2008, 61-62). Following Schmidt-Lux, Urania has contributed to sustainably secularizing the GDR and, later, Eastern Germany. With reference to Berger's secularization theory, in which secularization is a threefold process of (1) the differentiation of society, (2) the decline of the cultural and symbolic meaning of religion within society, and (3) the decline of relevance of religion in individual lives, Schmidt-Lux concludes that Eastern Germany can now be considered widely secularized (Schmidt-Lux 2008, 126-184). Through a contextualized history of Urania's activities and their effects on society and an analysis of biographical-narrative interviews with former citizens of the GDR, Schmidt-Lux furthermore proves that the secularizing impact of Urania is still recognizable (Schmidt-Lux 2008, 185-379). For Schmidt-Lux, the influence of humanist and freethinker organizations on secularization processes has been underestimated in the social sciences in general (Schmidt-Lux 2008, 24).

A two-fold secularization paradigm is chosen by Johannes Quack (2012) in his research on organized rationalism in India. On one hand, the title of his monograph 'Disenchanted India' can be understood in a programmatic sense: Quack wants to secularize the image of India as 'enchanted garden'—an image, co-constituted by Western scientists—through highlighting the existence, spreading, and vitality of rationalist organizations in India (Quack 2012, 308). On the other hand, similar to the approaches described above, Quack relates his concept of secularization to the agenda of the organizations on which he focuses and the effects of their practice on society. Rationalists in India were spreading scientific temper, striving for a reformation of India into a rational and fair society. To achieve this goal, they set themselves to fight and repress the influence of religions and other forms of 'superstitions' on the wider public (Quack 2012, 12).

The described approaches from different national and geographical contexts challenge theories which consider secularization as an anonymous process and a pure by-product of 'modernization'. They conceptualize secularization as conflict and add an important action-theoretical perspective to the discussion, including the impact of concrete agents on secularization processes. Humanist and freethinker organizations, then, appear as critical and confrontational agents towards religions, whose agenda is built up around the central goal of repressing religious influence on society and individual biographies. As important as this framework might be, its assumptions have to be re-evaluated with respect to *freigeistig* organizations in contemporary Germany. To do so, the practice, agenda, and strategy of

the largest contemporary *freigeistig* organization in Germany (in terms of membership), the HVD, shall be analysed in the following section. The data referred to, consisting of different forms of found data (magazines, books, websites etc.), six half-standardized interviews with officials of different *freigeistig* organizations, and three participant observation protocols of organizational meetings and events,² was theoretically sampled and assessed by open, axial and selective coding following Strauss and Corbin's approach of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

THE GERMAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION (HUMANISTISCHER VERBAND DEUTSCHLANDS [HVD])

The HVD was founded in 1993 as an umbrella organization for *freigeistig* organizations at the federal state level (John 1993). The main initiator of this foundation was the Freethinker Association, Western Berlin (*Deutscher Freidenker Verband, West Berlin* [DFV]), in which officials and members had discussed the necessity of a programmatic and structural realignment from the beginning of the 1980s onwards, especially in terms of overcoming its traditional self-understanding as labour advocacy (Isemeyer 2007). Taking into account the social transformation processes in Germany after World War II, like the dissolution of the labour movement and the development of a pop-, leisure-, and service-culture, the preservation of this self-understanding was considered a way into a crisis of identity and practice. In a 1989 article from 'Diesseits', the membership journal of the DFV (and later of the HVD), Klaus Sühl, then chairman of the DFV, proclaims a new agenda for his association, shifting from an advocacy of the labour movement to one of the religiously non-affiliated population in general.

*'Sticking to their traditional agenda, freethinkers are their own worst enemy [...]. Either organized freethought makes a fresh start, daring to turn to the wider public with confidence, or it will fall apart. But a fresh start cannot be done with reference to chestnuts. The renewal of the conditions of the Weimar Republic is neither imaginable nor desirable. We are all over and done with being an organization of the labor movement. [...] We are the advocacy of the non-church-affiliated people in this country. It is time for us to recognize this and to act accordingly'*³ (Sühl 1989, 33-35).

The DFV began to exchange ideas concerning a new policy with like-minded organizations from Germany and beyond. In Germany, some former federal state organizations of the BFGD (Bavaria, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia) were looking for a new national umbrella to widen their influence. They had left the freereligious scene mainly for ideological reasons and to distinguish themselves from the religious self-understanding of the BFGD. Furthermore, in the context of German reunification, the DFV soon established close contacts with the emerging federal state associations in the new eastern states of Germany, which particularly engaged in maintaining the *Jugendweihe* practice and offered social and counselling services with financial support from the state. In the former GDR, *freigeistig* organizations outside the institutional structure of the state were banned. The political elites themselves were claiming to

² All interviews and participant observations were conducted by the author in the context of his dissertation project at Bayreuth University, Germany. I want to thank all officials and members of *freigeistig* organizations involved for their openness and willingness to help.

³ Translated by the author from the German original: 'Mit dem Festhalten an seiner traditionellen Ausrichtung steht sich das Freidenkertum seit Jahrzehnten selbst im Weg [...]. Entweder das organisierte Freidenkertum macht einen Neuanfang, wagt es, in die breite Öffentlichkeit und damit in die Offensive zu gehen, oder es löst sich auf. Ein Neubeginn ist aber nicht mit den 'ollen Kamellen' möglich. Die Wiederherstellung Weimarer Zustände ist weder denkbar noch erstrebenswert. Wir sind schon längst keine Organisation der Arbeiterbewegung mehr [...]. Wir sind die Interessenvertretung der kirchlich nicht gebundenen Menschen in diesem Lande. Es wird Zeit, dass wir dies zur Kenntnis nehmen und eine entsprechende Politik machen'.

represent a state-socialist version of the freethought culture movement (Groschopp 2011, 493). As Schmidt Lux (2008) demonstrates, the few existing *freigeistig* organizations in the GDR, like the intermediary Urania Society, were state-controlled and only pseudo-independent.

Internationally, the DFV turned to the north-western European members of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), especially the Humanist Associations from Norway, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Guest contributions from officials of these associations in 'Diesseits' (e.g. Fragell 1989; Tielmann 1991) document their increasing influence on the strategy and ideology of the DFV, which became an IHEU membership organization in 1991 (Schultz 1991). The specific agenda of the later HVD can be traced first and foremost to these contacts. In the same year that the HVD was founded, it promptly hosted an IHEU conference (John 1993).

The national membership of the HVD today amounts to about 20,000 members. Five state associations have more than 1,000 members (Berlin-Brandenburg, Lower Saxony, Baden-Wuerttemberg, Bavaria, and North Rhine-Westphalia) and gained the status of corporation under public law (*Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts*), which guarantees certain privileges (see below). Furthermore, in the 1970s, the HVD in Lower Saxony (then Free Religious Congregation Lower Saxony) concluded a treaty with the state government analogous to those of the two main churches in Germany with different state governments. The treaty warrants annual state subsidies in the amount of 100,000 *Deutsche Mark* for the defrayal of labour costs and airtime within the Lower Saxony broadcasting under public law as well as the implementation of a non-confessional alternative to religious education, called *Werte und Normen*, at public schools and a respective teacher training programme (Isemeyer 2003).

The HVD of Berlin-Brandenburg is the most influential federal association of the HVD in socio-political terms. Within the last decade, its membership has risen from 4,000 to 8,000 members. Furthermore, it increased its staff from 500 to over 1,200. Staff predominantly work as teachers, either in one of over twenty preschools under the aegis of the Humanist Association or at public schools as teachers for Humanist Life Education (*Humanistische Lebenskunde*). *Humanistische Lebenskunde* is taught as a confessional (confession: humanism) alternative to religious education and is attended by more than 50,000 pupils, predominantly in Berlin. In addition, the HVD of Berlin-Brandenburg operates as the social agency for several hospices, a college of education, centres of counselling and welfare, youth and family. Its cultural programmes comprise concerts and literary readings as well as rites of passage (naming rituals, youth initiation, weddings, and funerals). In 2011, the annual budget of the HVD Berlin-Brandenburg added up to 45 million euro, most of which was granted by the regional government of Berlin (Schröder 2017, 38-40). The Humanist Academy of Berlin-Brandenburg, which is affiliated to the HVD Berlin-Brandenburg, fosters theoretical discussions on humanism through conferences and the publication of collected volumes. The Academy is considered a precursor of an academic *Humanistik*, which, in the eyes of many HVD officials, should be installed at state universities analogous to theology departments (Eggers 2003). In most of its fields of action, the HVD Berlin-Brandenburg demands equal

treatment with the churches with reference to the guarantees of religious neutrality within the German constitution (*Grundgesetz*).

'We want the same status the churches have. This is our main strategic goal in Germany, an equal treatment in all areas and an all-encompassing service for the religiously non-affiliated people in every condition of life, as it exists for the religious people'⁴ (Interview 1, HVD Official).

Similar to its sister-association in Berlin-Brandenburg, the HVD Bavaria provides social services in the areas of education, culture, and counselling (Participant Observation 1, General Assembly HVD Bavaria 2014). At least within the metropolitan area of Nuremberg-Fürth, the HVD became a socio-political factor in Bavaria similar to the HVD in Berlin-Brandenburg. It runs 18 preschools and day-care facilities and employs more than 200 people (Bauer 2012). In 2008, after a four-year legal dispute, the HVD Bavaria was given permission to launch a private humanist elementary school (*Weltanschauungsschule*) in Fürth with 100 pupils. Besides providing social services, the HVD Bavaria also has some sort of congregational life, similar to the member associations from Lower Saxony, Baden-Wuerttemberg, and North Rhine-Westphalia, and in contrast to the HVD in Berlin where the communal factor is rather underrepresented (Participant Observation 2, *Philosophisches Frühstück* HVD Bavaria; Participant Observation 3, *Lichtfest* HVD Bavaria). However, this communal life is regarded as a luxury addition to the financially existential social service practice of the HVD. It can only be refinanced through surpluses of the attractive preschool practice (Interview 2, HVD Official). Recently, this social service agenda was also adapted by the federal HVD associations from Lower Saxony, Baden-Wuerttemberg, and North Rhine-Westphalia, which traditionally renounced social and public services for the religiously non-affiliated for the sake of cultivating congregational membership.

'We are planning to become a provider of social services through founding a company with limited liability together with our sister association from Bavaria and with a little help from the national association. That means we are generally thinking of opening a preschool in North Rhine-Westphalia. And in the long run we have many other ideas, a combination of a care facility and a preschool for example, such things. This illustrates our steely determination to organize humanism in a proper way'⁵ (Interview 3, HVD Official).

The practice and strategy of the HVD can be encapsulated by the concept 'structural isomorphy' as used by social scientists, such as Bodenstein (2010) and Böllmann (2010). The concept refers to processes of adaptation of discursive and legal arrangements and is often used to describe and explain the practice of Muslim associations in Germany, especially their equal treatment inquiries with regard to the Christian main churches. As the HVD case indicates, *freigeistig* organizations can align to religio-political and state-church law arrangements as well. This can be seen in the church-like form of organization and the status *Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts* gained by several federal state associations as well as in the church-imitating practice of the HVD (e.g. rites of passage and social services in the areas of welfare, counselling, and education). In whatever area the churches gain state support or enjoy certain privileges, the HVD strives to be treated equally; this applies to having its own school subject

⁴ Translated by the author from the German original: 'Wir wollen den gleichen Status haben wie die Kirchen. Und das ist unser großes strategisches Ziel auch in Deutschland, die volle Gleichbehandlung und ein umfassendes Angebot für konfessionsfreie Menschen in allen Lebenslagen, so wie es das gibt für die religiösen Menschen'.

⁵ Translated by the author from the German original: 'Und wir sind jetzt in einer Situation, wo wir sagen: Wir müssen die Mitgliedschaft durch Werbung neuer Mitglieder wieder vergrößern. [...] Vielleicht ganz interessant im Zusammenhang mit der Aufbruchstimmung dürfte sein, dass wir jetzt zusammen mit dem Landesverband Bayern, und, ja, unter einer geringen Beteiligung des Bundesverbandes eine gemeinnützige GmbH gegründet haben, deren wesentliche Aufgabe darin bestehen wird, den Gang in die soziale Praxis zu vereinfachen. Das heißt, wir sind in Nordrhein-Westfalen dabei, grundsätzlich uns mit der Einrichtung einer Kindertagesstätte zu beschäftigen. Und langfristig gibt es natürlich noch sehr viele andere Ideen, beispielsweise die Kombination Pflegeeinrichtungen-Kindergarten, solche Dinge. Das verdeutlicht auch nochmal, dass wir wild entschlossen sind dem Humanismus die richtige Organisation zu geben'.

at public schools, departments in state universities, and the right to found private schools and preschools, hospices, and family centres.

Koenig (2003) describes the specifically German arrangement of religio-politics as a result of a path of development which can be traced back to the so-called ‘confessional wars’ in the early modern period and which was stabilized in the nineteenth century, when the German nation state arose (Koenig 2003, 104). For this process relations between the territorial states and, later, the nation state and the two main churches in Germany were of particular importance. Thus, the legal and religio-political incorporation of religious minority groups requires their churchlike, hierarchical form of organization to gain privileges from the state that were initially created with reference to the main churches. According to article 140 of the *Grundgesetz*, which incorporates the church-state law of the Weimar Republic into the German constitution, there is no state church in Germany, an example of the secularizing effects of the law. However, the article legalizes cooperation with and public funding of religious and religion-like secular groups (*Weltanschauungsgemeinschaften*), which can be incorporated into state politics and function as social agencies. Associations with the status *Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts* enjoy special privileges by law. Some of the conditions to become a *Körperschaft* are defined by the *Grundgesetz* (such as a sufficient number of members to guarantee the sustainability of the association), while others become apparent in the jurisdiction of the different courts, among them a pledge of loyalty to the German state and a hierarchy-based form of organization with identifiable contact persons for the state (for a general introduction to German state-church law in relation to religio-politics, see Dirksen 2003).

The church-imitating practice and organizational structure of the HVD shows its incorporation into the abovementioned religio-political arrangements, which lead to a convergence of religious *and* secular players in the field and, thus, to similarities in terms of organizational structures and practices between churches, other religious communities, and *freigeistig* organizations. In its attempt to provide social services to the wider public, the HVD depends on public funding, which the state only grants under the premise of an adjustment to the religio-political arrangements: when HVD officials asked for public funding of their so-called *Jugendweihe* in Berlin, the senate refused this application on the grounds that churches are not being directly funded for a similar practice, either. The argumentation of HVD officials that *Jugendweihe* could be financed in terms of cultural or youth work funding was not even discussed by the senate (Kunz 1999). The HVD’s adaptation of church-like structures and practices illustrates how a public incorporation system⁶ regulates religious communities as well as *freigeistig* organizations, thereby stabilizing itself.

The HVD often complains about a discriminatory treatment when it comes to the actual application of the described arrangements.

‘It is obvious that, up until today, there is no factual equal treatment of religious communities and *Weltanschauungsgemeinschaften*. [...] Secular associations do not even have the same social status or enjoy the same privileges as the small religious communities, which they exceed in terms of membership numbers. Again, religious education at public schools is a good example for this: While, for example, religious education of the Old Catholics, the Mennonites, the New Apostolic Church and Orthodox Christians has been approved and funded without hesitation,

⁶ The concept ‘incorporation system’ was coined by Soysal (1994) as a heuristic framework for the social analysis of migrant organizations. It shifts the focus away from the cultural and ethnic background of their members to the institutional, organizational, and discursive context they find in their respective host countries as strategies to regulate citizenship within a national community. According to Soysal, migrant organizations define their goals, functions, and strategies in relation to the discourses, institutions, and resources they find in their host countries. In this respect, the organizational structures and collective identities of these organizations are regulated by institutional forms of public incorporation systems (Soysal 1994, 86).

similar motions by the HVD were denied, which is why we filed lawsuits at the administrative courts of North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony now”⁷ (Heinrichs 2010, 132).

Moreover, HVD officials criticize a lack of transparency concerning the public funding of the Christian main churches in Germany. This lack of transparency would lead to a situation where the association ‘cannot argue adequately with courts and administration offices for its right to be granted on the ground of the equal treatment principle’⁸ (Isemeyer 2003, 65). The many legally hidden and therefore disguised privileges of the churches are seen as, in fact, unconstitutional (Heinrichs 2013, 48).

THE HVD AND SECULARIZATION

Within the HVD, secularization is generally welcomed as cultural advancement and enhancement of freedom for the individual (Groschopp 2002, 68). However, the agenda of the HVD does not follow a secularizing self-understanding. In fact, the association considers Germany as already secularized.

‘I do not see a focus on criticism of religion in our agenda these days because we already have a widely secular society. The conditions have clearly changed compared to the situation fifty or sixty years ago’⁹ (Interview 4, HVD Official).

Dissociating from a purely critical stance on religion and a secularization agenda was part of the programmatic and structural realignment of the HVD described above—especially for the federal associations in the eastern parts of Germany. Eastern Germany is often described as one of the most secular regions of the world (Schmidt-Lux 2008). For broad parts of its population, religion has hardly played any role for generations. Following HVD officials, these religiously indifferent people need concrete life support in their daily routines as well as in situations of crisis and biographical transition rather than secular propaganda programmes.

‘Especially when wandering through the streets here in Berlin, where religion is not as present as in, let’s say, Cologne or Munster or Bayreuth, for example, you know, there are still things that a humanist view recognizes, evaluates, and processes, which do not have anything to do with religion. When I am on my way through Berlin, I see all these stressed people, poor people, rich

⁷ Translated by the author from the German original: ‘Eine faktische Gleichstellung von Religions- und Weltanschauungsgemeinschaften gibt es allerdings bis heute offensichtlich nicht. [...] Die säkularen Verbände haben noch nicht einmal die gleiche Stellung und die gleichen Privilegien wie die kleinen Religionsgemeinschaften, die sie an Mitgliederzahl übertreffen. Hier ist der Religionsunterricht wiederum ein gutes Beispiel: Während z.B. die Alt-Katholiken, die Mennoniten, die Neuapostolische Kirche und die orthodoxen Christen problemlos eine Zulassung ihres Religionsunterrichtes und eine entsprechende Förderung hierfür erhalten haben, wird dies z.B. dem HVD verwehrt, so dass derzeit in NRW und Niedersachsen Klagen vor den Verwaltungsgerichten geführt werden’.

⁸ Translated by the author from the German original: ‘[Der HVD kann] seinen Zuwendungsanspruch auf Grundlage des Gleichbehandlungsgrundsatzes gegenüber Verwaltungen und Gerichten nicht glaubhaft begründen’.

⁹ Translated by the author from the German original: ‘Aber ansonsten sehe ich Religionskritik bei uns eigentlich gar nicht mehr so stark im Fokus heutzutage, weil wir eben schon eine weitgehend säkulare Gesellschaft haben. Es hat sich ja doch deutlich verändert gegenüber der Lage von vor 50 oder 60 Jahren’.

people. I have a *weltanschaulich* perspective on of all of this of course, you know? ¹⁰ (Interview 4, HVD Official).

Furthermore, along with the outlined strategy of the HVD comes a legitimization and affirmation of the German religio-political arrangements, which results in a secularization-opposing mode of action. Intended or not, through claiming a positive equal treatment with regard to the Christian churches, the HVD implicitly endorses the German religio-political incorporation system. The effects of this structural isomorphy stand in opposition to secularization with respect to Casanova's first and third meaning of the term: the functional differentiation of society in Germany in general is contradicted by the cooperation of the state with religious communities, for example through confessional religious education at state schools, which relinquishes parts of childhood values education to religious communities. The HVD does not aim at abrogating these arrangements but rather affirms them by demanding the equal right to teach a confessional version of humanism in state schools. Moreover, strengthened by the cooperation with the state, religious communities and the HVD remain important players within the public sphere. This stands in sharp contrast to processes of religious privatization which constitute the third meaning of secularization according to Casanova. Therefore, the HVD, being integrated into the German religio-political incorporation system, unfolds secularization-opposing effects rather than being a secularizing agent within society.

The structural isomorphy with regard to the HVD has caused serious conflicts between different *freigeistig* organizations in Germany. Traditionally, the *freigeistig* scene in Germany is characterized by laicist claims for a negative equal treatment of all religious and secular associations by the state. The agenda of the *Weimarer Kartell* (WK), the first umbrella organization bringing together freethinkers and freereligious groups in Germany in the first decade of the twentieth century, was dominated by the insistence to separate the state from religion, for example through putting an end to religious education at state schools (Groschopp 2011, 26-27). Up until today, many *freigeistig* organizations in Germany, like the Giordano Bruno Foundation (*Giordano Bruno Stiftung* [GBS]) or the International Association of Nones and Atheists (*Internationaler Bund der Konfessionslosen und Atheisten* [IBKA]), put forward this secularizing agenda. They advocate a strict secularism and criticize a limping separation of church and state in Germany through the incorporation of the state-church paragraphs of the Weimar Republic constitution into the *Grundgesetz*. According to the GBS, the separation of church and state has to be completed instead of being defined down even further through applying the cooperation paragraphs to increasingly more religious or secular associations (Interview 5, GBS Official). The GBS categorically rejects a cooperation between the state and religious communities or *freigeistig* organizations, arguing that it leads to a confessional division of society instead of making a contribution to integration. In particular, religious education at public schools is a thorn in the eyes of many GBS officials (see, for example, Matthäus-Maier 2013, 93). Furthermore, public funding for religious communities is condemned since it uses the taxes of the religiously unaffiliated for religious purposes, such as the pensions of bishops (Giordano Bruno Stiftung 2014, 44). The GBS takes note of the HVD strategy with scepticism and disconcertion. In the final analysis of GBS claims for laicism, their implementation would put an end to large segments of HVD's practice.

'Still, I think it is wrong to separate kids based on confession, even if there is a "humanist confession", if you want to call it that. [...] I think] that Lebenskunde could be replaced by another school subject, like Ethics, for all pupils. [...] For me, the appropriate approach would be that

¹⁰ Translated by the author from the German original: '[G]erade auch wenn man hier durch Berlin geht, wo, sage ich mal, Religion nun nicht so präsent ist wie vielleicht in Köln oder in Münster oder Bayreuth beispielsweise, ne?, gibt es immer noch Sachen, die sozusagen der humanistische Blick sieht, auch bewertet und verarbeitet, die jetzt überhaupt nichts mit Religion zu tun haben. Also wenn ich halt gerade in Berlin unterwegs bin, die ganzen gestressten Menschen, arme Menschen, reiche Menschen, da hat man natürlich aus einer weltanschaulichen Perspektive einen Blick drauf, ne?'

*education at schools is not influenced by worldviews, and this could be accomplished in an Ethics school subject. Humanist Lebenskunde would be simply redundant if there was an adequate Ethics school subject. [...] This is why it would not be a great loss if Lebenskunde ceased to exist*¹¹ (Interview 6, GBS Official).

This statement marks a major tension within the field of humanism in general and German *freigeistig* organizations in particular. On one hand, organizations like the HVD claim to meet the needs and interests of nonbelievers within society. On the other hand, the GBS, the IBKA, and others aim at promoting secularism and the complete separation of religion and state by interdicting any kind of cooperation. The HVD position appears relatively new to the field. It makes sense only with regard to the narrative of an already secularized population with needs beyond secularist propaganda, as they are attributed especially to the eastern German population.

CONCLUSION: TWO TYPES OF FREIGEISTIG ORGANIZATIONS

The social scientific hypothesis of humanist and freethinker organizations causing secularizing effects has to be re-evaluated, at least with reference to contemporary *freigeistig* organizations in Germany. Rather than relating to religions in a critical and confrontational manner for the sake of catalysing their decline, the HVD—the strongest recent *freigeistig* organization in Germany—imitates the Christian churches in terms of organizational structures and practice. HVD officials even appreciate Christian claims to respond to human needs and to take part in strengthening social cohesion, as long as the HVD is entitled to do so itself. Alongside this sort of religion-relatedness comes the HVD strategy of being incorporated into the religio-political arrangements in Germany in terms of privileges like public funding for social services or gaining the status *Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts*. Intended or not, this structural isomorphy contributes to a ratification and stabilization of the German religio-political incorporation system, which stands in contrast to secularization in at least two respects: it affirms the mutual penetration of a religious and a political segment of society and strengthens the public role of religious communities and *freigeistig* organizations like the HVD.

Looking at the contemporary *freigeistig* scene in Germany as a whole, not all organizations follow the described HVD strategy. Some of them even sharply oppose its claims for a positive equal treatment with the churches. Among them are the GBS and the IBKA, which relate to religions in a critical and confrontational manner and stand for laicist political structures and a decline of religious influence on the public sphere. Others, like the BFGD, however, share the organizational and programmatic structures of the HVD and its vision of being treated like the two main churches. Therefore, two types of *freigeistig* organizations in Germany have to be distinguished, with only one unfolding secularizing effects. Whereas these two types of *freigeistig* organizations, which I call ‘social-service type’ (including the HVD, the BFGD, and others) and ‘ideologically agitating type’ (including the GBS, the IBKA, and others), share a common naturalist worldview and similar values (such as individual autonomy, enlightenment, solidarity, or immanent worldliness), they have to be distinguished in terms of organizational forms, practice, and especially strategy. The ‘social-service type’ is characterized by classic membership-based forms of organization and provides social, counselling, and educational services to meet the needs for orientation and life-support of nonreligious populations. To

¹¹ Translated by the author from the German original: ‘Und trotzdem halte ich es für falsch, die Kinder zu trennen nach Konfessionen. Auch nach der humanistischen Konfession, wenn man das so nennen darf. [...Ich denke], dass er [gemeint ist der Lebenskundeunterricht des HVD, Anm. StS] sich problemlos ersetzen ließe durch einen Ethikunterricht für alle. [...] Der richtigere Ansatz wäre meines Erachtens, dass weltanschauliche, ungebundene weltanschauliche Bildung unbedingt nötig ist an Schulen, und zwar in Form eines Ethikunterrichts. [...] Humanistische Lebenskunde wäre dann einfach redundant, wenn es einen guten Ethikunterricht gäbe. [...] Deswegen wäre es auch nicht schlimm, wenn er nicht mehr da wäre’.

be able to finance its practice, this organizational type is geared towards state support and cooperation. The 'ideologically agitating type' stands for activism-based forms of organization and a polarizing effect on public debates concerning religion and *Weltanschauung*. It aims at enlightening society through influencing media discourses and rejects any cooperation of the state with religious or *freigeistig* groups for the sake of secularism and laicism. The two organizational types can also be distinguished through different patterns of religion-relatedness: whereas critical and confrontational modes of religion-relatedness dominate the 'ideological agitating type', the 'social-service type', depending on the constellation, is characterized through many different, even religion-friendly, modes, such as imitation, dialogue-orientation, or even cooperative religion-relatedness.

It would be an interesting endeavour to test this typology of *freigeistig* organizations and its consequences with regard to secularization in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe and beyond.

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- Interview 4, HVD Official, 22/04/2013.
- Interview 5, GBS Official, 09/12/2013.
- Interview 6, GBS Official, 30/09/2014.

Participant Observations

Participant Observation 1, General Assembly HVD Bavaria 2014, 26/10/2014.

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Participant Observation 3, *Lichtfest* HVD Bavaria, 06/12/2014.