“The great majority of our working classes avoid the church,” Georg Metzger observed in his report on the St. William Inspection for 1913.

Similarly, religious interest and churchly attachments are almost wholly absent among the social elite—capitalists, intellectuals, senior civil servants…. There are some parishes that can still boast of active participation in Sunday services, and others have a solid core of regular participants, but for the most part an astonishing number of people these days stay away from the church on Sundays, and do so without any particular reason.1

And yet, the inspector’s description could have been made by any number of European churchmen during the second half of the nineteenth century. Well before the turn of the century, ministers had been grumbling about declining interest in church life, especially in the European big cities. Whether in London or Berlin, in Amsterdam or Paris, the number of people attending Sunday services regularly was ebbing noticeably. Whole segments of the population—men above all—made it to services only rarely, if they showed up at all.2 Parents made less of an effort to have their children baptized. In France and in Germany after 1875, where civil marriage was obligatory, an ever larger number of couples decided not to have a minister bless their unions.3

For over a century, such statements and trends have formed the crux of arguments in favor of a secular, urban modernity. While churchmen bemoaned their shrinking congregations, they blamed the trend on

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1 SWIR 1913.
3 On religious trends in urban Europe, the essays in Elm and Loock, *Seelsorge und Diakonie* and McLeod, *European Religion in the Age of Great Cities* remain useful points of departure. Lucian Hölscher, ed., *Datenatlas zur religiösen Geographie*, represents the most extensive effort to quantify church-oriented piety (Kirchlichkeit) in modern Europe.
urban growth, the tavern, and the modern Zeitgeist; sociologists like Ferdinand Tönnies and Max Weber concluded that this departure from the churches’ ritual offerings was just another sign of the churches’ demise as meaningful institutions in European social and cultural life. Although scholars have subjected the secularization thesis overall to withering criticism in recent years, its indictment of “traditional” religion remains influential. Cognizant of the statistical evidence that demonstrates a clear downward trend in official religious practice over time, revisionists like Callum Brown and even Norbert Busch contend that these numbers do not tell the whole, or even the most important part of the story. To understand religion’s place in the modern world, they argue, we should look not at religious services and church rites, but rather at the new fields of activity—religious associations, newspapers, and devotions like the cult of the Sacred Heart—as well as the new modalities for propagating religious ideas in modern society. In this way, the revisionists, too, have essentially declared the old religion dead.

This chapter, the first of three devoted to forms of religious cultural practice in German Strasbourg, proceeds from a different logic. Instead of dismissing worship and church-based piety as irrelevant and moribund, it asserts that they remained important for shaping religious identities and notions of religious community in the urban environment. The clergy’s Jeremiads and the sociologists’ prognostications notwithstanding, as late as 1914 substantial numbers of urban dwellers still maintained ties with official religious communities. Inspector Metzger himself admitted in 1910, “that on feast days, there has been no remarkable drop in church attendance.”

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5 But even less adamantly revisionist studies, such as Yves-Marie Hilaire’s groundbreaking, Une chrétienté au XIXe siècle. La vie religieuse des populations du diocèse d’Arras (1840–1914) (Lille: Publications de l’Université de Lille III, 1977), and Werner K. Blessing, Staat und Kirche in der Gesellschaft. Institutionelle Autorität und mentaler Wandel in Bayern während des 19. Jahrhunderts (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), provide little sense of what it was like to attend (Catholic) services during the nineteenth century.

6 SWIR 1910.