INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

When it comes to explaining the process of how religion loses or retains its significance, existing theories and models do not provide satisfying answers. The most common explanations view either the socialist past or larger scale processes of modernization to be the cause of eastern German secularization. The former regards secularization as a top-down implementation of communist regimes that were inherently hostile to religion, contrary to Western Europe where secularization was regarded as a spontaneous process. Meulemann, a German sociologist, for example, speaks explicitly of ‘forced secularization’ (Meulemann 1996). He even attempts to reach a final verdict concerning the importance of repression in contrast with the ongoing processes of secularization, the origins of which can be traced to the period before the founding of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). On the basis of the unchanged differences between East and West Germany with regard to the answers to certain survey questions, he concludes that secularization has been the result of the communist dictatorship (Meulemann 2003). One of the problems with this thesis is that it is not particularly easy to manipulate people in such a way that they abandon their convictions and practices (see, for instance, the case of Poland). This leads to another conclusion concerning eastern Germany, that