CHAPTER EIGHT

THE REHABILITATION OF EX-OFFENDERS IN EASTERN GERMANY: A RELIGIOUS-SECULAR CONFIGURATION

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INTRODUCTION

Seemingly, an East German society has emerged after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR hereafter). This society is not a homogeneous entity, nor do any clear-cut boundaries separate it from its eastern European and West German neighbors. A couple of features do, however, seem to distinguish it from them. Beyond all the clichés about East Germans being *jammerossis* – a term referring to nostalgic Easterners complaining constantly about their lost living standards – or being *ostalgisch* – there is a body of serious literature arguing in favor of such a distinction. Authors who grew up in the GDR (Pollack et al. 2000; Engler 2002; Kollmorgen 2005), emphasize that the shared experience of the radical transformation of their social, political, economic, and cultural institutions has given East Germans a distinct perspective on the world. It is hence not so much a question of substantial differences in identity, values, or practices but one of perspective on these identities, values, and practices.

After the fall of communism, the financial and organizational input to change came from the West, but East Germans participated in this rebuilding and appropriated the new institutions from their own perspective, and – importantly – from below since the leading positions were taken mostly by West-Germans. The rapidity of these institutional changes contrasted strongly with the slow motion of everyday interactions in East Germany. Only now, twenty years later, some configurations can be identified.

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1 I use in this text on purpose the expression “East Germany” in capital letter to make clear that I do not refer to a geographical area located in the eastern part of Germany, but that I would like to remain close to the German expression *Ostdeutschland*, that is, the former GDR. In this text “East Germans” means hence former GDR citizens.
Religious institutions also underwent major transformations and religion as such was given a new location in society. The religious communities and actors reacted in different ways to the new situation so that the picture that emerges today is a very variegated one. In this essay I shall consider the changes more closely that occurred in one particular field into which religion started to play a new role after the end of the GDR: the rehabilitation of ex-offenders. I shall take the 1980s as a chronological point of departure and follow the transformation through today. This is the time lap often discussed by those most involved in the field of ex-offender rehabilitation.

In a first step, I will look back upon the socialist period and at the changes that the Wende introduced in the realms of religion and ex-offender rehabilitation. Secondly, I will present some of the empirical cases studied in my fieldwork: I will try to point to certain similarities between Protestant, Catholic, and secular East German actors in the field of social assistance for ex-offenders as a result of a precise historical process in which not only the secular has produced the religious (Asad 2003) but also the other way round. If confronted to West German actors and to their secular-religious configuration, however, some differences will become visible.

Religion and offenders in a socialist society

Socialism had its own view of the role of religion with regard to offenders. The GDR had put the prison department under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior which implied that “prisons were run on a police state model” (Arnold 1995, 83). Conditions there were very rough and work was compulsory. As a consequence, the internal regulations were the work of the Minister of the Interior and the chief of the police. While no pastoral care at all was admitted to youth prisons, military prisons, and internment camps, there was in fact a legal basis for it in normal prisons.2

According to the 1977 Prison Act, prisoners who were members of a church were granted, on demand, freedom of religious activities. The fact that the church was recognized by the state as an institution with a territorial religious domain was indeed very significant for the

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2 The spiritual care offered in the framework of chaplaincy in the GDR was primarily Protestant and Catholic.