East Germany is one of the most secularized regions in the world. Religious traditions have lost their importance for the population and church members are a minority in Eastern Germany. This religious decline was enforced by the political repression of the socialist government of the German Democratic Republic and its atheistic and secularist ideology. However, political repression was not the only reason for the religious decline. At this time, religious beliefs had already lost their plausibility and their capacity to give orientation in everyday life. This article presents data from a research project entitled “Religious and Non-Religious Worldviews in Precarious Conditions of Life” at the University of Leipzig analyzing the aftermath of this secularism propagated by the GDR government. The paper focuses on persons of low income and education because their vulnerability to the contingencies of life is assumed to be particularly strong. On the basis of biographical interviews with recipients of welfare benefits and of group discussions conducted in Eastern Germany, I examine how contingencies are perceived and described by the interviewees and if the consciousness of contingency is connected with references to religious semantics. In a second empirical step, negative references to religion are analyzed as an expression of an atheistic and secular worldview in East Germany.

1. Religious Belief and Church Affiliation in Eastern Germany

The eastern part of Germany is the region where the Lutheran reformation had its origins, but today the secularity enforced by the former socialist government of the GDR (Cf. Wohlrab-Sahr/Karstein/Schmidt-Lux 2009) is the cultural heritage determining the relationship of East Germans towards the church and religious beliefs. East Germany – as well as Estonia, the Czech Republic and the Netherlands – is one of the most secularized regions in the world (see Inglehart/Norris 2005, 54f; Pickel 2009; Pollack 2008; Wohlrab-Sahr/Schmidt-Lux 2003).

Owing to processes that led to the decline of religious beliefs and church affiliation, religious traditions have lost their importance for the population. In 2006, only about one quarter of East Germans compared to three quarters of West Germans were still members of a Christian church. In the ISSP-Data 1998, East Germany shows the highest rates in Europe of persons
without affiliation to any denomination at 75.6% and those without belief or unsure belief in God at 83.5%. Only the Czech Republic with 76.1% and Sweden with 75.1% have similar rates in religious belief. Comparing selected European countries, Pollack and Müller observe that East Germany has the lowest rates in church affiliation (22.7%), church attendance (3.5 per annum, only in Finland is it lower with 2.9%), belief in God (20.7%) and significance of religion (14.3%). The rates of alternative religiosity are also quite low among East Germans: 16.3% believe in astrology and 8.1% in spiritualism (Pollack/Müller 2011, 123; see also Pickel 2010).

Not only is the East German population not affiliated to religious denominations, it is, to a great extent, not even religious at all. In the “Religions-Monitor”, the group of “non-religious” is 28% all over Germany, but there are great differences between East and West: in East Germany 63% are identified as non-religious, in the western part only 19% (Wohlrab-Sahr 2009, 149).

The secularisation process had already begun in the region of East Germany – and particularly in highly industrialised areas – in the 19th century (Cf. for example McLeod 2000). Secular movements came into existence which paved the way for considerable erosion processes of the church. After the Second World War, the number of church members in the GDR shrank drastically; this was encouraged by the socialist government. In 1950, only 8% were not church affiliated and over 80% of the East German population were still members of the Protestant church. In the first years of the German Democratic Republic, harsh conflicts took place between state and Church, especially centred around young people. They flared up with regard to the ceremony (“Jugendweihe”) in which, in the socialist system, 14 year olds are given adult social status as a rival to and finally almost complete replacement of the Protestant confirmation service (see Pollack 1993, 249).

After the political rupture of 1989, a few single new memberships of the church took place but they were far exceeded by the number of renounced church memberships (Pollack 2002, 378f.). Since 1989, the rates of non-church affiliation in East Germany have increased from 65% in 1991 to 74% in 2008 (Pickel 2011, 42). And they will probably increase even more in the future. Comparing different cohorts in east and west, Wolf has established that more than 80% of the youngest cohorts (born in 1973 or later) say that they never pray (Wolf 2008, 116). He concludes in his results for East and West Germany: