

1 Introducing Socialism and Secularism as Two Cultures

Beginning in the late nineteenth century and lasting well into the Cold War, socialism represented the most powerful and sustained force of political and social dissent in Europe. Prior to the First World War, this dissent operated largely outside of the dominant order. Socialist political parties were excluded from participation in government and the industrial actions undertaken by labor unions were often met with violence and state repression. After the war, the socialist movement split into rival Social Democratic and Communist parties. The former entered government in many countries, while the latter contributed substantially to the political polarization that fed the emergence of authoritarian regimes across much of Europe. Germany was early in the formation of an autonomous socialist movement. Following its founding in 1875, the Socialist Workers' Party of Germany, which took the name Social Democratic Party or SPD in 1890, became the pacesetter for sister parties across Europe for the next forty years.

Religion played a crucial role in the politics of the European left and this was certainly true of the socialist movement as well. Despite the presence of Christian socialists, the overwhelming image of socialism at the time was of a movement dedicated to driving religion from the realm of the state and public life. This took a moderate form in the steadfast support of separation of church and state: the declaration that "religion is a private matter" remained a central plank of the SPD platform. A more radical stance appeared in anticlericalism. From his seat in the Reichstag, Germany's leading socialist August Bebel outraged his fellow parliamentarians by declaring in 1874: "Christianity and socialism go together like fire and water."¹ Over the next eighty-five years, until the revamping of the SPD program at its congress in Bad Godesberg in 1959, the German socialist movement was a site of repeated anticlerical agitation. Many Germans came to view the socialist movement as anti-Christian, if not antireligious and atheistic.

¹ Quoted in: Vernon L. Lidtke, "August Bebel and German Social Democracy's Relation to the Christian Churches," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 27 (1966): 251.

This book offers a novel interpretation of the religious politics of German socialism. Before outlining this interpretation, I would like to briefly consider the two most prevalent explanations of the socialist criticism of religion. The first was developed by nineteenth-century socialists themselves, who held that, because the Christian churches were closely allied to monarchy and defended hierarchy as the natural order of society, they formed part of the apparatus of class oppression. Christian theology served as an intellectual fetter. In Karl Marx's influential formulation, religion was "the opium of the people" and "the sigh of the oppressed creature," i.e. a palliative response to human suffering, which diverted energy from the struggle against the ultimate source of oppression – capitalist exploitation.² Anticlericalism thus appeared as the logical corollary in the religious realm of the struggle against state authorities and class opponents in the political realm.

Recent literature on "secularism" offers a contrary reading of Bebel's statement. Because "secularism" forms my own chief term of analysis, it is important to address this literature head on and clarify the different definitions being used. Within the growing field of inquiry known sometimes as "secular studies," secularism refers to the ideologies, policies and constitutional arrangements whereby modern states and elites have sought to manage religion.³ Whereas earlier secularization theory proposed that the reduction of the realm of the religious was a largely automatic macro-processes of modernity, newer studies see in secularism a political operation, in which the distinction between the secular and religious is mobilized to make a number of political interventions possible. This operation has practical dimensions, such the separation of church and state, as well as discursive ones. Joan Wallach Scott has demonstrated, for example, how the secular–religious binary was used to reinforce gender and racial binaries, in order to discursively construct the ideal of the modern European who was white, male, educated and secular.⁴ Use of this binary is by no means exclusive to antireligious forces, and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd has spoken of a "Protestant secularism" that contrasted a supposedly rational Protestantism with dogmatic and fanatical Catholicism.⁵ Due to such variation, some scholars have come to identify multiple secularisms.⁶ Yet, given the linkages between various uses of the

² Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," in *Marx: Early Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 57.

³ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003); Michael Warner, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁴ Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton University Press, 2018), 13–15.

⁵ Elizabeth S. Hurd, "The Political Authority of Secularism in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations*, 10/2 (2004): 247.

⁶ Marian Burchardt, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Matthias Middell (eds.), *Multiple Secularities Beyond the West: Religion and Modernity in the Global Age* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015); Linell

secular–religious distinction at the societal level, most scholars in the field of secular studies still generally speak of secularism in the singular, as a hegemonic ideology “characterized by its universalist pretensions and its claim of superiority over non-secular alternatives.”⁷

Viewed from this perspective, the anticlericalism propagated in socialist circles appears in a new light. Rather than being a defensive stance against the alliance of throne and altar, which is how socialist secularists generally portrayed it, anticlericalism appears as a call on socialist workers to identify with the emerging dominant, secular order. To a certain extent one can reconcile these viewpoints, by recalling the fact that socialists saw themselves as the legitimate heirs to the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and Democratic movement of 1848. Most likely, Bebel’s declaration in 1874 was meant to rub his liberal colleagues’ noses in the radical consequences of scientific discovery that many professed to believe in private, but no longer wished to be associated with in public. Yet, this interpretation leaves secularism as a hegemonic discourse of modernity that shaped and thus united a wide array of social formations, from Protestantism to liberalism to socialism. It does not satisfactorily account for the socialist attitudes towards religion and atheism documented in this book. Nor does it sit with the historical use of the English term “secularism” as it emerged in the nineteenth century.

Leading voices in secular studies, such as Talal Asad and Joan Wallach Scott, claim that rather than imposing an ahistorical, normative definition of secularism on past events, they have grounded their analyses in a genealogical account of the conceptual use of secularism.⁸ Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, their conceptual histories of secularism hide as much as they reveal about what was meant by the term, when it was coined in 1851 by George Holyoake to recast the English Freethought movement that he led.⁹ Holyoake had been attracted to the use being made of the term “secular” by liberals at the time, for example, in their calls for secular national schools. The resultant association of “secular” with Freethought caused some liberals, such as the prominent reformer Richard Cobden, to recoil from the term “secular” and from Holyoake’s subsequent addition of “ism” to it.¹⁰ Yet, as historian Laura

Elizabeth Cady and Elizabeth Hurd (eds.), *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁷ Elizabeth Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton University Press, 2008), 235; Peter van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 144–67.

⁸ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 16; Scott, *Sex and Secularism*, 4–6.

⁹ Todd Weir, “Germany and the New Global History of Secularism: Questioning the Postcolonial Genealogy,” *Germanic Review*, 90/1 (2015): 6–20.

¹⁰ In 1850 Richard Cobden successfully convinced the founders of the National Secular School Association to drop “secular” from their name and thereby avoid “opening up a chink in their armour which they would some day have rivet up with more difficulty and discussion.” S. E.

Schwartz has noted, the principal aim of Holyoake's neologism was to insist that Freethought represented a "positive agenda and alternative value system" and not merely criticism of religion.¹¹ Holyoake variously defined secularism as "this-worldism," "cosmism," "a new form of thought and action" and "the policy of life to those who do not accept Theology."¹² Secularism, in other words, identified a system of knowledge and ethics that could compete with other actors in the religious field.

Thus, at its inception, secularism appeared against the backdrop of liberal calls for separation, but with the express purpose of naming the radical dissenting culture of more plebeian freethinkers. When Asad and Scott anachronistically applied the term "secularism" to liberal elites, many of whom, in fact, eschewed the term at that time, they occluded the actual definition proposed by freethinkers. To differentiate between the two, I refer to the former as "political" and the latter as "worldview" secularism. *Political secularism* names the legal and discursive use of the secular-religious binary to further political ends. *Worldview secularism* denotes the advocacy of cultural transformation based on replacement of dualistic religions by immanent systems of meaning. Whereas political secularism has been depicted as a largely top-down affair of modern states and powerful social forces, worldview secularism was usually championed by more marginal social segments and aligned to political dissent. In this study, when I use the term secularism, I am speaking of worldview secularism.

By applying the term "worldview" to Holyoake's movement, I am myself engaging in anachronism, given that reception of the German term *Weltanschauung* was only just beginning in the English-speaking world in the 1850s. In Germany, however, *Weltanschauung* was already the core term around which nascent formations of German secularism were organizing. In 1850, the Free Religious preacher Eduard Baltzer began to publish a pamphlet series *Old and New World-View*.¹³ His first pamphlet on "The Relationship of the Free Congregations to the Old Religions, especially to Christianity" clearly invoked the secular-religious binary; however, it did so to plant the flag of the new worldview in the religious field. The propagation of worldview remained the main task of later secularist associations, but always in connection with

Maltby, *Manchester and the Movement for National Elementary Education 1800–1870* (Manchester University Press, 1918), 78–79.

¹¹ Laura Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women's Emancipation, England 1830–1914* (Manchester University Press, 2012), 8.

¹² W. Stewart Ross, "We Want Science, and More than Science," *Open Court*, 276 (1892): 3479; George Holyoake, *The Principles of Secularism* (London: Austin, 1870), 27.

¹³ Eduard Baltzer, *Das Verhältnis der freien Gemeinde zu den alten Religionen, besonders zu dem Christenthume*, vol. I, *Alte und neue Welt-Anschauung: Vorträge, gehalten in der freien Gemeinde zu Nordhausen* (Nordhausen: Förstemann, 1850).

ritual practice, social engagement and life reform. This made German secularism a discrete social and cultural formation.

This brings us to the main argument of the book. Although the many anticlerical statements found in the historical record, such as Bebel's in 1874, suggest a straightforward relationship between socialism and religion, in fact, a range of motivations were at work. Some socialists claimed the mantle of Enlightenment from liberalism and thereby supported liberal calls for separation and secularization, while others gave vent to criticism of the role the churches played in the social oppression of the working class. Yet, as the closer inspection undertaken in this book reveals, the socialists most dedicated to what was then called "the religious question" had a further motivation: they were active adherents of worldview secularism. They constituted a clearly defined secularist-socialist subculture, sustained by organizations and intellectuals, who preached a positive faith in a humanistic, materialistic worldview that existed alongside and intermingled with Marxist convictions. I call this subculture "red secularism" to distinguish it both from socialist party culture and from the freethinking culture of German liberals.

The Culture of Secularism

Before looking more closely at red secularism, I will introduce the broader culture of worldview secularism as it formed in nineteenth-century Germany. This culture first found institutional form in the Free Religious movement that emerged among Protestant and Catholic rationalist dissenters during the period of social ferment leading up to the revolution of 1848. The Free Religious Congregations maintained the basic structures of churches, but by the 1860s many had abandoned Christianity in favor of a belief in the monistic unity of spirit and matter in a purely immanent reality. Secularism gained in associational diversity with the founding of Freethought associations in the 1880s and the formation of a German Monist League in 1906 under the leadership of biologist Ernst Haeckel. What united all of these organizations was the effort to eradicate church influence in public life while at the same time promoting secularist alternatives to the component parts of nineteenth-century church life, that is, community formation, ethical instruction of the youth, and a totalizing system of faith.

In my previous book *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession*, I argued that the apparent paradox of a secularist religion was not so paradoxical when viewed from the standpoint of what was still a "Christian state." The term "confession" (in German *Konfession*) provides the key to understanding how worldview secularism related to its religious environment. The German states adopted the ecclesiastical term *Konfession* in the early nineteenth century and used it to

refer to the recognized Catholic and Protestant churches. This abstract category allowed the states to create distance between themselves and these churches, while at the same time codifying the unequal treatment of religions.¹⁴ Full rights were extended only to the state-sanctioned churches, while followers of secularism and minority religions were excluded from some rights. Although not technically *Konfessionen*, Judaism and worldview secularism functioned as a “third” and “fourth confession,” because of their strong presence in the confessional field. Even though the membership of all secularist organizations probably ranged between 40,000 and 50,000 in the late nineteenth century, their competitors and the state treated them as a significant competitor. In this way, worldview secularism decisively shaped the confessional field.¹⁵

Attention to the dynamics of the confessional field remains critical in this present study. Secularism mapped onto socialism, because both occupied structurally analogous positions within the semi-liberal, semi-authoritarian political and social order of nineteenth-century Germany, in which the state-imposed confessional order played a central role. However, in this study I use “culture” as the chief analytical term, because it provides a neutral concept that places secularism and socialism on an equal footing. Culture can be applied to political and religious spheres alike, thus overcoming categories of comparison that would place socialism and secularism into different orders. In addition, culture is appropriate to our endeavor because the German term *Kultur* was utilized by the historical actors to define the territory in which politics and religion overlapped, from the *Kulturkampf* of the 1870s to the struggle during the Weimar Republic between the advocates of “Kultursozialismus” and the “Kulturreaktion.”

Culture has a long pedigree in the social sciences, and like secularism, it has enjoyed so many uses that the definition utilized in this book requires clarification. I was inspired by the essay “Two Cultures” penned by the British writer C. P. Snow in 1956 to describe the deep division within the British republic of letters between more Christian and pessimistic humanists, on the one side, and more secular and optimistic scientific elites, on the other. Snow was well aware

¹⁴ With reference to my study, Reinhard Schulze suggested at the 2018 Leipzig conference of the Multiple Secularities project that until the 1950s–1960s Europe was shaped by a “confessional secularity.” See the later formulation in Reinhard Schulze, “Islam and the Global History of Secularity,” in *Dynamics of Islam in the Modern World: Essays in Honor of Jamal Malik*, ed. Saeed Zarrabi-Zadeh et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 17–37.

¹⁵ I derive the notion of the confessional field from Pierre Bourdieu, “Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field,” *Comparative Social Research*, 13 (1991): 1–44. For an account that questions the application of confessionality to secularism, see Rebekka Habermas, “Secularism in the Long Nineteenth Century between the Global and the Local,” in *Negotiating the Secular and the Religious in the German Empire: Transnational Approaches*, ed. Rebekka Habermas (New York: Berghahn, 2019), 115–42. For figures on the membership in secularist organizations in Germany, see Appendices 2 and 3 below.

that dividing contemporary intellectuals into two camps was an oversimplification. He acknowledged that “culture” was purposefully vague, “something a little more than a dashing metaphor, a good deal less than a cultural map.”¹⁶ My use of the concept of culture is similarly heuristic. Like Snow, I utilize it to pull two social formations out of the background of modern society. I am not claiming that the “two cultures” of secularism and socialism are the only ones relevant to understanding the relationship of religion and left-wing politics in Germany of this period; one could also examine other “cultures” such as esotericism or anarchism. However, like Snow did for his case, I want to insist that we should concentrate on precisely these two cultures, because they are the most important movements of dissent in their respective fields in the period under investigation.

I will add one further specification to my definition of the term culture. It differs from that of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who viewed culture as comprising “webs of significance” akin to language, which are utilized by a human community to make meaning.¹⁷ Instead, I approach the cultures of socialism and secularism as self-organizing and self-referential social systems, comprising individuals, associations and practices. According to German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, the essence of a social system is that it is iterative and autopoietic, which means that it produces and reproduces itself through the continual circulation of members, information and activities, all of which are recognized by the system as component parts.¹⁸ In the case of socialism, such parts are the party and labor organizations, electoral campaigns, as well as the ideas discussed in meetings and in the press. Socialist culture incorporated also associations, songs and rituals, in what American historian Vernon Lidtke called the “alternative culture” in his eponymous book of 1985.¹⁹ The notion that secularism might be also grasped as a *culture* in its own right, which I develop in this book, was prompted by the work of cultural studies scholar Horst Groschopp, whose *Dissidenten* (1997) first showed that secularism was a philosophically and politically coherent project reproduced in an extensive network of intellectuals and associations in imperial Germany.²⁰ Thus, like the socialist movement, secularism, too, was not merely a discourse, but comprised self-organizing networks and associations that engaged in a high degree

¹⁶ Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 9.

¹⁷ Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30 (at 5).

¹⁸ Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz Jr. and Dirk Baecker (Stanford University Press, 1995), 32–41.

¹⁹ Vernon L. Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

²⁰ Horst Groschopp, *Dissidenten: Freidenkerei und Kultur in Deutschland* (Berlin: J. H. W. Dietz, 1997).

of self-reflection. In each case, I argue that these systems extended beyond the card-carrying members of socialist parties or Freethought associations. Secularism operated within a wide network of popular science institutes, radical women's organizations, and cultural reform movements advocating causes as diverse as homosexual rights, vegetarianism and abstinence.²¹

This book explores two dimensions of the relationship of the cultures of secularism and socialism. First, it seeks to provide a comprehensive picture of red secularism as a self-organizing subculture that was formed at the intersection of the larger cultures of socialism and secularism. Second, the book asks about the relationship between red secularism and the socialist parties, which was not solely one of mutual support. The relationship contained much tension and conflict, and secularists formed a recurring source of inner-party dissent. In the following sections, I give an overview of these two dimensions of red secularism and sketch out the main questions and findings contained in the following chapters. I then ask how these findings require us to rethink core assumptions contained in the historical literature. Through an exploration of the tensions generated by red secularism, this book casts a new light on the histories of socialism, secularism and German politics more broadly.

What was Red Secularism?

The book begins by charting the development of a specifically socialist subculture within the wider culture of secularism. As modern socialism began to take shape in Germany in the 1860s, its boundaries to this secularist culture were fluid. Discussion groups led by secularist intellectuals, whether in the Free Religious Congregations or in worker education societies, formed a seedbed for the first organizational efforts of German Social Democracy. Of the ten men depicted on a commemorative postcard celebrating the early leaders of German Social Democracy, four were organized secularists (see Figure 1.1). And as the young turner August Bebel rose to become the leading figure in German Social Democracy in Saxony in the 1860s, he had to face successive leadership challenges from well-known present or future leaders of Free Religion or Freethought.²² Bebel was himself an avid reader of secularist popular science and anticlerical religious criticism.

²¹ Diethart Kerbs and Jürgen Reulecke (eds.), *Handbuch der deutschen Reformbewegungen: 1880–1933* (Wuppertal: Hammer, 1998).

²² These challengers included Free Religious leaders Emil Roßmäßler and Robert Krebs, as well as future Freethinker Max Hirsch. Todd H. Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 158.

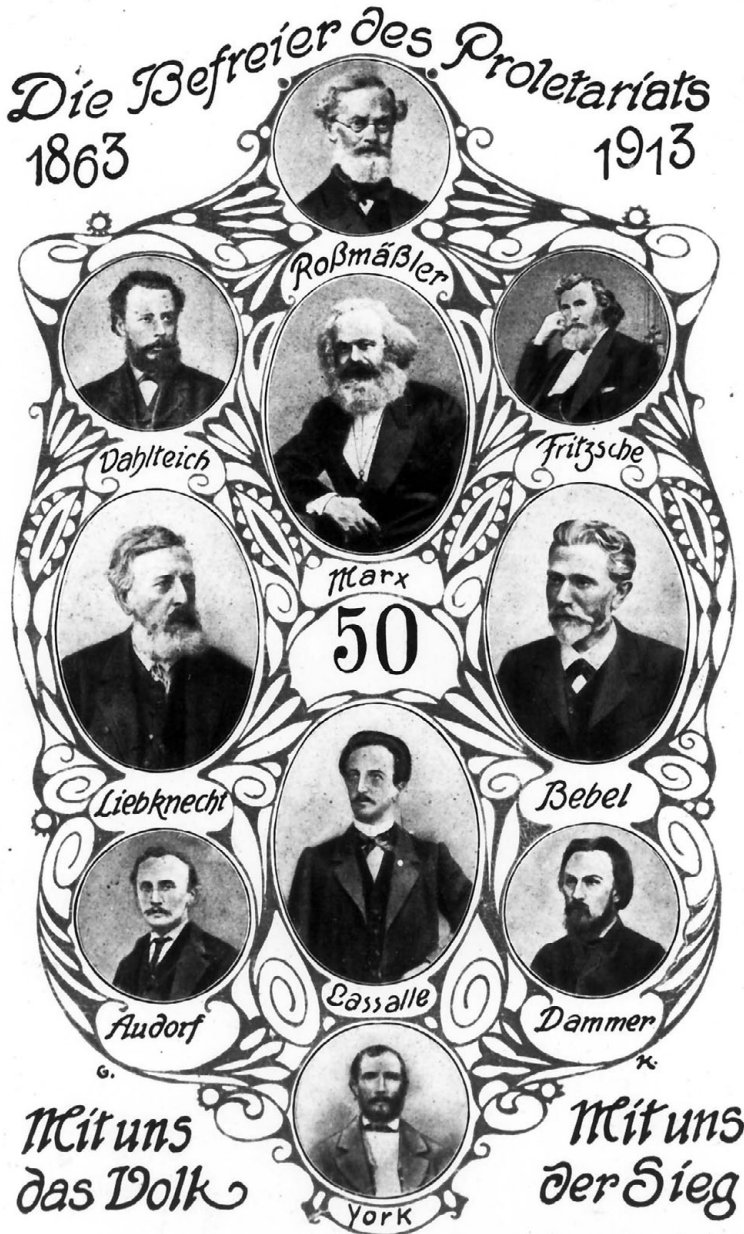


Figure 1.1 Poster celebrating the founders of German Social Democracy: "The liberators of the proletariat 1863–1913." Rossmäessler, Fritzsche, Dammer and Vahlteich were members of Free Religious Congregations. (Courtesy: AdsD/FES 6/FOTB004002)

Scholars have often interpreted Freethought and popular science as key vectors for liberal influence over the lower-middle and working classes.²³ From the 1880s onward, however, a discrete socialist-secularist movement emerged. In 1887 socialists took control of Germany's largest single secularist organization, the Berlin Free Religious Congregation, and in 1908, socialists broke away from the liberal-dominated German Freethought League and formed the Central Association of Proletarian Freethinkers. The separation between the socialist and what was often called the "bourgeois" [*bürgerlich*] wings of secularism was an international process that continued until 1924, when most socialists quit the International Association of Freethinkers and set up a rival International of Proletarian Freethought.

Even as Proletarian Freethinkers came to embrace Marxism, they continued to uphold a distinctly secularist worldview and imaginary. In fact, early on, most socialists did not use the term *Weltanschauung* to refer to Marxism, because the term was occupied. In a brochure entitled *Religion, Church and Socialism* of 1875, the Free Religious preacher Andreas Reichenbach argued that socialism would fail if it remained just a theory of economics: "Just like every thinking man, socialism requires a worldview. Thus, one can say that socialism is compatible with the essence of religion, and can cultivate it, naturally in a completely different form." This worldview, he continued, could only be "taught to us by the results of strictly scientific . . . research." It was "namely the worldview of the general theory of evolution."²⁴ Many terms have been used in the historical literature to describe this scientific worldview, whether positivism, materialism or Darwinism. However, the most accurate term is *naturalistic monism*, because it captures the shared faith of nearly all secularists in the unity and totality of existence in an entirely immanent reality, which was accessible through scientific knowledge of the physical world. As we will investigate, the relationship of historical materialism and naturalistic monism was complicated. One of the chief findings of this book is that naturalistic monism retained an abiding influence in socialist circles, even as communists in the late 1920s moved towards a rigid dogmatization of Marxism-Leninism. As our penultimate chapter investigates, one cannot

²³ Gangolf Hübinger, 'Die monistische Bewegung: Sozialingenieure und Kulturprediger', in *Kultur und Kulturwissenschaften um 1900* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1997), 246–59; Andreas Daum, *Wissenschaftspopularisierung im 19. Jahrhundert: Bürgerliche Kultur, naturwissenschaftliche Bildung und die deutsche Öffentlichkeit, 1848–1914* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1998).

²⁴ Andreas Reichenbach, *Religion, Kirchentum und Sozialismus* (Solingen: Genossenschafts-Buchdruckerei, n.d.), 16. Given the infrequent application of "Weltanschauung" to socialism prior to 1890, Christina Morina's elevation of worldview as her key concept for analyzing Marxism must be seen as a potentially anachronistic imposition of a contemporary definition onto historical actors. Christina Morina, *The Invention of Marxism: How an Idea Changed Everything* (Oxford University Press, 2023), xx, 231.

understand the vibrant avant-garde socialist culture movement of the Weimar Republic without taking into account the central role of monism within it.

This study differentiates between “pure” and “extended” secularist organizations. The former includes the associations of Free Religion, Freethought and monism, who made worldview and religious politics their principal concern, while the latter refers to the many popular education institutions that integrated monism into their curricula. Membership in the pure secularist organizations is used to keep track of committed secularists within the socialist parties and thereby better reveal the self-organization of the secularist-socialist culture. Following these persons, I have been able to chart the diffusion of secularist-monist worldview into the socialist milieu, divulging, for example, that key institutions of socialist education, such as the Berlin Workers’ School founded in 1891, were initiated and staffed by red secularists.

How many socialist secularists were there? If we examine the members of the organizations of pure secularism, the numbers varied widely over the period under consideration. Just prior to the First World War, the principal umbrella organization of the socialist freethinkers claimed a national membership of 4,900–6,400 (as compared to ca. 5,000 in the rival “bourgeois” German Freethought League). A significant percentage of the roughly 18,000 Free Religious (ca. 40,000 if family members are included) were affiliated with the socialist movement, including most likely a majority of the roughly 1,800 member strong Berlin congregation. Free Religious Congregations in the northern cities of Hamburg and Königsberg, in the Saxon cities of Chemnitz, Leipzig and Dresden, and in centers of Bavarian Protestantism such as Nuremberg and Fürth, had close ties to the socialist movement.²⁵ Although overall numbers were small, secularists were overrepresented in the prewar party leadership. When a congregation formed in the growing industrial center of Ludwigshafen in 1891, almost the entire local SPD leadership became members.²⁶ At a time when only a minute fraction of Germany’s population had left the churches (less than 1 percent by 1914), some 60 percent of socialist candidates for the national parliament had become “confessionless” by 1912.²⁷ The category of “confessionless” had been created by German authorities to

²⁵ Gerhard A. Ritter and Klaus Tenfelde, *Arbeiter im Deutschen Kaiserreich: 1871 bis 1914* (Bonn: Dietz, 1992), 765; Theo Schneid, “Für das Leben, nicht für das Jenseits wollen wir wirken’: Die proletarische Freidenkerbewegung in Duisburg und Umgebung,” in *Trotz allem! Arbeiteralltag und Arbeiterkultur zur Zeit der Weimarer Republik in Duisburg*, ed. Manfred Pojana and Martina Will (Essen: Klartext, 1992), 62.

²⁶ Peter Bahn, *Deutschkatholiken und Freireligiöse: Geschichte und Kultur einer religiös-weltanschaulichen Dissidentengruppe dargestellt am Beispiel der Pfalz* (Mainz: Gesellschaft für Volkskunde in Rheinland-Pfalz, 1991), 210–11.

²⁷ Jürgen Schmidt, “The Secularization of the Workforce in Germany in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Secularization and the Working Class: The Czech Lands and Central Europe in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Lukas Fasora (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 43.

accommodate secularists; however, one cannot say what percentage of the confessionless socialists were actually organized secularists, aside from those who stated their affiliation with Free Religion. Yet, in the very last election to the Prussian Landtag in May 1932, nearly 10 percent of the elected Social Democrats (9 of 94) were self-acknowledged members of Free Religious Congregations.²⁸ When we look to “extended” secularism in our investigation of worker education and autobiographies, it becomes clear that red secularists were able to exert considerable influence in the party culture, especially through the institutions of worker education. The Berlin Workers’ School, one such institution among many, reached some 15,552 workers with its heavily secularist educational curriculum between 1906 and 1914. The dimensions and nature of red secularism changed dramatically after the war, when the membership of socialist Proletarian Freethought associations skyrocketed to nearly 610,000 by 1930, with 120,00 in the rival communist associations. By comparison, at that time party membership of the SPD was 1,021,000 and of the KPD 135,808.²⁹ However, here too, membership numbers do not necessarily equate with influence. Many socialists and communists were passive freethinkers, drawn to these associations by attractive cremation insurance policies. Thus, throughout the period covered in this volume red secularism remained a significant and influential presence within the wider socialist culture, but decidedly a minority one.

The secularist movement provided a crucial door through which middle-class intellectuals entered the party. They played the part of heretics on the stage of the public sphere. This enabled some to establish reputations as “free-floating” intellectuals who belonged to the cultural avant-garde, while others used notoriety gained at public trials for blasphemy to launch political careers in the socialist movement. Yet, intellectuals also connected secularism with inner-party dissent. Chapters 3 and 4 trace how one generation of secularist intellectuals participated in a party schism of 1890 and later went on to play leading roles in anarchism, revisionism and radicalism.

²⁸ Whereas a total of 27 socialist and communist delegates in the Landtag designated themselves as “Free Religious” over the course of the Weimar Republic, 247 chose “dissident,” 32 “confessionless” and 26 “religionless.” The only other party to use non-Christian or non-Jewish nomenclature was the National Socialist Party, which had one delegate who called himself “confessionless” and 31 who preferred “gottgläubig.” Barbara von Hindenburg, *Biographisches Handbuch der Abgeordneten des Preussischen Landtags: Verfassunggebende Preussische Landesversammlung und Preußischer Landtag 1919–1933* (Frankfurt am Main; New York: Peter Lang, 2017).

²⁹ For figures on Freethought associations, see appendices. For SPD and KPD memberships: Wilhelm Leo Guttsman, *The German Social Democratic Party, 1875–1933* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), 153; *Die Kommunistische Internationale vor dem VII. Weltkongreß: Materialien* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1967), 141.

Chapter 5 turns from intellectuals to their audiences. Here I compare the relative importance of Marxism and scientific materialism in the political consciousness of working-class socialists. By examining workers' autobiographies, we find a deep penetration of secularist worldview in the identities of many socialist activists, who often converted to socialism upon encountering scientific materialism. We delve into the special appeal of secularism to women socialists and use this to enter into a hotly contested topic in the history of the early feminist movement, namely the relationship of secularism to the politics of gender.³⁰ Red secularists certainly shared the opinion of many liberals, who correlated natural science with masculine autonomy and organized religion with feminine subordination to clerical authorities. Yet, female secularists understood natural scientific worldview to be empowering. It provided them with an explanation for existing gender differentiation and offered a means for the future transformation of women and men through social and biological reform. For this reason, it is not surprising that secularists were particularly prominent among the female leaders of Social Democracy.

In order to provide a thick description of the culture and politics of red secularism, I restricted my archival research to a few cities and regions. The first four chapters of the book focus on Berlin, which was far and away the country's most important secularist city, and in which prior to 1914 nearly half of all church-exits registered nationally took place.³¹ From Chapter 5 onwards, I include other regions and other cities, in particular Leipzig and Munich, but also Dresden and Nuremberg. These examples enable comparisons that highlight the fact that secularism, like socialism, had to contend with diverse political and legal contexts, shaped in different ways by the sharp confessional conflicts of the first decade following German unification in 1870/71. The picture that emerges is of a regionally dispersed secularist culture that mapped onto the early points of concentration of the socialist movement in urban areas, in which Protestantism predominated but where church attendance was low.

The research design entailed some further choices to limit complexity. When investigating socialism, I focused on the organizational layers and theoretical debates within the leading socialist parties – the SPD, the USPD and the KPD – and treat only in passing the important presence of secularists in the historically more marginal movements of anarchists and syndicalists and the communist opposition. Similarly, I focused on the three most important movements of “pure” secularism, namely Free Religion, Freethought and monism. I have chosen fairly conventional start and end dates for this study. The termination of the “Socialist Laws” in 1890 saw a major transformation of the SPD and coincided roughly with the emergence of recognizably socialist

³⁰ See Chapter 5 for discussion of this debate.

³¹ Schmidt, “Secularization,” 44.

secularist organizations. The appointment of Hitler's cabinet in January 1933 brought an abrupt end to socialism and red secularism, as both movements were essentially shut down in that year.

The "Gretchen Question" of Social Democracy

Revealing the contours and dynamics of the socialist secularist subculture is the first principal aim of this book. The second is to explore the relationship of this subculture to the socialist parties and to determine how it influenced the political events of this tumultuous period of German history. The picture that emerges is of a querulous relationship, shaped by the tension between what I described above as worldview and political secularism. Red secularists promoted anticlericalism, life reform and naturalistic worldview, while the party leadership maintained a strategic interest in limiting party involvement to advocacy of the separation of the fields of religion and politics. Party debates formed around, but never resolved the tension between these two positions, leaving this the structuring paradox of the socialist relationship to religion. In the following, I lay out how this paradox appeared in the debates between party leadership and the organizations of secularism prior to 1933. This short overview is furthermore intended to provide readers unfamiliar with the history of German socialism with a frame on which to hang the information of the subsequent chapters.

For the leaders of the Social Democratic Party, the relationship of socialism to religion constituted what Germans refer to as a "Gretchen question." A *Gretchenfrage* cuts to the core of an issue, but places the respondent in an uncomfortable quandary, in which an honest answer bears significant costs. It comes from Goethe's drama, in which Faust is intent on seducing the pious girl Gretchen, who asks him:

Nun sag, wie hast du's mit der Religion? Du bist ein herzlich guter Mann, allein ich glaub, du hältst nicht viel davon.

Well, tell me, you must, about your religion – how do you feel? You're such a good man, kind and intelligent, yet I suspect you are indifferent.³²

Faust responds by first insisting that each person should be allowed to form his or her own religious opinion, but when pressed further by Gretchen, he switches tack and affirms the experience of spiritual wonder in nature that could encompass both his pantheism and her Christianity. While the first answer confirms his dissenting views on religion, his second answer is evasive. It is particularly apt to speak of the Gretchen question of German Social

³² Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy*, trans. Martin Greenberg (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 122.

Democracy, because, like Faust, the party maintained the official position that everyone should enjoy freedom of conviction. Yet, many socialist leaders were self-described atheists, who identified with the scientific knowledge and heroic stance of Goethe’s Faust. The party thus faced a conundrum; its leaders worried that identifying openly with their own disbelief would alienate those potential socialist voters and union members who, like Gretchen, still clung to their religious faith.

Until the fundamental rewriting of the party program of the SPD at the Bad Godesberg Congress in 1959, socialism’s relationship to religion was a constant source of friction within the party, because strategic considerations repeatedly clashed with intellectual passions. The matter was further complicated by the fact that it was not merely Christian opponents who called the party out. More often than not, it was secularists within the party who posed the Gretchen question at congresses and in the socialist press, when they demanded that the party come clean. They wanted German Social Democracy to publicly identify with monistic worldview and to suppress the churches as buttresses of the imperial state and capitalism. In truth, the Gretchen question of German socialism was really a double question: What was the party’s relationship to religious actors and institutions, on the one hand, and to the culture of secularism, on the other?

The ambivalence of the party policy on religion was written into its first program of 1875. Instead of committing the party to scientific materialism and anticlericalism, the founding congress in Gotha, under the guidance of Wilhelm Liebknecht, adopted the “Declaration that religion is a private matter.”³³ This was a dilatory compromise, which permitted various interpretations. Its explicit call to privatize religion by separating church and state in the public domain was relatively unproblematic. But declaring religion a private matter also meant that party members were expected to privatize their own religious or atheist beliefs. This stipulation was clearly understood at the time as a rebuke to party secularists, who argued that their atheism was an intrinsic part of socialist culture.

Rather than ending debate over religion and secularism, however, the Gotha Program only placed it in a new framework. Some secularists opposed the relegation of religion to a private matter and continued to push their agenda during the tumultuous period of the late 1870s, when liberal support of the anti-Catholic *Kulturkampf* began to falter, in part out of fear of the rising socialists. The Stuttgart freethinker Albert Dulk declared in the party’s flagship newspaper *Vorwärts* in May 1878 that “religion” was “the main bastion of antisocialism, of reaction, the breeding ground of all social evil. Thus, whoever

³³ Discussion in: Sebastian Prüfer, *Sozialismus statt Religion: Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie vor der religiösen Frage 1863–1890* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002).

views this struggle as peripheral and warns against it, has no conception of the true battleground of socialism. This struggle is even more necessary and decisive than the political [struggle].”³⁴ When Berlin socialist Johann Most called on workers to leave the state churches in spring 1878, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck seized on the opportunity to tar the SPD with atheism and help mobilize parliamentary support for the passage of a series of repressive measures that became known as the “Socialist Laws” and that prevented Social Democrats from operating publicly between 1878 and 1890.

Under this repression, many members of the underground party, including August Bebel, changed their tune on the religious question. They came to see secularists as unreliable partners whose anticlerical politics threatened party survival. The expiration of the Socialist Laws in 1890 triggered an upswing in secularist agitation within the party and renewed challenges to the neutrality plank. When a freethinker proposed that the party adopt an antireligious position at the Halle Congress in October 1890, Wilhelm Liebknecht used the opportunity to demand religious neutrality, denigrating the secularists with the jibe: “I do not love the priests at all, and the anti-priests just as little as the real ones.”³⁵

The secularists did not relent, and at the 1902 Congress, the Free Religious preacher Georg Welker demanded that the party enter a *Kulturkampf* in the field of religion. To support his position, he quoted some of Bebel’s spicier anticlerical speeches of the 1870s. Bebel reacted allergically and provided a clear explication of his current thinking on the matter:

Each one may believe what he pleases. If he is a Social Democrat, he may be a Catholic, a Protestant, a Materialist, or an Atheist – that is no one’s business in the party. It is only when, as a Social Democrat, he wishes to make propaganda in the party in favor of his religious convictions that we energetically protest, for then he interferes with the principle that religion is a private matter. (Applause.)³⁶

Here Bebel stipulated that secularist worldviews were effectively the same as religious beliefs. Only a party that excluded the worldview convictions of its members from party politics, could legitimately demand an end to “the confusion of the public and religious powers,” which characterized the confessional state, and pass laws ensuring “that the state should be secular, and that religious communities should be private societies.” Shifting his line of argument, Bebel then made clear that this position was not merely a principled one, but reflected the tactical interests of a party that was expanding its electoral

³⁴ Quoted in Lidtke, ‘August Bebel’, 251.

³⁵ Quoted in: Prüfer, *Sozialismus statt Religion*, 336–37.

³⁶ *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitagess der sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands: Abgehalten zu München vom 14. bis 20. September 1902* (Berlin: Buchhandlung Vorwärts, 1902), 244.

base from strongholds in the largely secularized, urban Protestant milieus of North, East and Central Germany, into the Catholic industrial areas in the West and South.

We must take care not to shock the religious idea of any member. On the contrary, it is our opinion, and we cannot hold it too strongly, that in religious questions we must observe absolute neutrality and nothing but neutrality. (Applause.) . . . I can assure him [Welker] that if he is to be a candidate in a district where there are many Catholics, his methods would not ensure his success. (Applause.) What Welker held to be a defect in our party is really a great advantage. . . . In practical questions our point of view is quite clear. It is visible that Social Democracy will help all the oppressed, and that is the best propaganda! (Loud applause.)³⁷

At the annual meeting of the German Freethought League in September 1903 Welker was attacked by socialist firebrand Adolph Hoffmann – not for seeking a *Kulturkampf* against the churches, but rather for insensitivity to party politics. He recommended pushing “agitation for the cause of Freethought from the bottom up, not from the top down, as Welker [proposed].”³⁸ Anticlericalism, in other words, should be pursued without directly confronting the official party policy of religious neutrality.

As the party was clarifying its policy of religious neutrality in the first decade of the twentieth century, new secularist associations formed that claimed to be explicitly Marxist. In 1905, a Nuremberg freethinker founded a socialist paper *Der Atheist*, which soon became the mouthpiece for Proletarian Freethought. In its first issue, Arnold Dodel-Port, a Swiss botanist and former chairman of the German Freethought League, interpreted the policy of “religion as a private matter” in a fashion typical of secularists. He defended the right of each worker to determine his or her own worldview but assumed that the free action of the mind would ultimately support scientific facts, and thus necessarily lead the workers to the monist worldview. Thus he admonished them: “Do not listen to anyone who tells you: believe this or believe that and you will be blessed! Rather figure out your own affairs: ask nature and ask the universe, ask the laws of evolution and extract from them the maxims of a rational way of life! And you will be happy!”³⁹

When the Proletarian Freethinkers formed a national umbrella organization in 1909, they pushed the party to accept anticlericalism as a necessary part of socialism. “Because historical materialism does away with all religious ideologies,” they argued, “it is unthinkable that a leading party comrade could hold a church function, because it is impossible that he might believe

³⁷ *Protokoll SPD Parteitag 1902*, 245.

³⁸ “Protokoll der 20. Hauptversammlung des deutschen Freidenkerbundes zu Görlitz am 20. und 21. September 1903,” *Der Freidenker* (1903): 157–59.

³⁹ Arnold Dodel, ‘Religion-Privatsache!’, *Der Atheist*, 1 (n.d.): 1–4.

[in God, T. W.].” Taking aim the party leadership’s position, the manifesto found it “absolutely reprehensible that short-sighted party comrades combat our purely social-democratic movement, because they do not understand that we are not dealing here with bourgeois efforts or futile games.”⁴⁰

The various positions taken on the SPD’s “Gretchen question” fed directly into the key theoretical debates of the prewar decade, which pitted the party mainstream first against the revisionists around Eduard Bernstein and then against the radicals around Karl Liebknecht. As we explore in Chapter 6, the ranks of the revisionists and radicals swelled with secularists, who saw in these dissenting movements room for both natural-scientific worldview and anticlericalism. In 1912, radical and revisionist secularists joined with “bourgeois” counterparts in a campaign for church-leaving, centered initially in the secularist stronghold of Berlin. The high point came in six open-air rallies attended by many thousands in Berlin in October 1913, one of which featured the future co-founder of the Communist Party Karl Liebknecht taking the stage with the chairman of the Monist League Wilhelm Ostwald to demand a “mass exodus” from the church.

Because the church-leaving campaign involved key members of the socialist faction in the Prussian parliament, the national leadership felt compelled to respond. In the central committee meeting in October 1913, Johannes Meerfeld, editor of a Social Democratic newspaper in the heavily Catholic city of Cologne, claimed that the church-leaving campaign was damaging the party’s claim to religious neutrality and that the Catholic Centre Party was “very content with this . . . sport of the Berlin comrades. We should strongly recommend to the comrades that they leave their finger from this agitation.” Meerfeld was opposed by party co-chair Hugo Haase, who reminded the committee that the declaration that religion is a private matter “is valid in two directions. First it makes demands of the state, second, however, it allows individual party members personal freedom regarding their stance or opposition towards the church. Outside the [party] organizations, we cannot prohibit any comrade from concerning himself with religious or church matters.” Following an inconclusive debate, the second party co-chair and future chancellor Friedrich Ebert proposed a resolution declaring that the agitation to leave the state churches was a private matter of the Freethought organizations and completely separate from the Social Democratic Party.⁴¹

This exchange demonstrates that the past solutions to the Gretchen question were open to renegotiation even at the highest echelon of the party.

⁴⁰ *Der Atheist*, 4 (1909): 254.

⁴¹ Dieter Dowe (ed.), “Protokoll der Partei-Ausschuß-Sitzung vom 19. und 20. Dezember 1913,” in *Protokolle der Sitzungen des Parteiausschusses der SPD 1912 bis 1921* (Berlin: Dietz, 1980), 17–18.

A compromise resolution was reached, but as Chapter 7 makes clear, the positions remained unreconciled and reasserted themselves when the leadership fell out over the war in 1916 and the party split in two in 1917. Haase became the chair of the Independent Socialist Party (USPD), which gathered antiwar radicals, including the bulk of the party secularists. Ebert remained chairman of the rump or “Majority” SPD (MSPD), which drew moderates, including many with Christian affiliations. During the revolution that followed Germany’s defeat in November 1918, religious policy became a bone of contention between USPD and MSPD, which for two short months came together to jointly rule Germany. Adolph Hoffmann became the USPD co-minister of culture in Prussia and unilaterally declared full separation of church and state, which meant severing church ties to the schools and ceasing state collection of church taxes. Following an uproar from the churches and their affiliated parties, Hoffmann’s co-minister from the MSPD rescinded this decree and postponed decisions on church–state matters until after the convention of a freely elected national assembly. Following the collapse of the power-sharing arrangement and the violent suppression of revolutionaries by the MSPD government, another Berlin Free Religious leader, Ernst Däumig, became USPD co-chair and led the left wing of the party into a union with the much smaller Communist Party (KPD) in December 1920. Meanwhile, now shorn of its most radical and anticlerical members, the MSPD issued a new program at its Congress in Görlitz in 1921 that moved it decidedly away from any tacit support of secularism. Religious policy returned to its paradoxical stance again after the bulk of the rump USPD rejoined the SPD in 1922.

With the collapse of the USPD, the KPD became the chief gathering point of revolutionary socialism in Germany. It had a different answer to the Gretchen question. Whereas the SPD central committee repeatedly issued warnings to the half-million-strong associations of Proletarian Freethought not to speak in the name of the SPD, the Communist Party made no bones about its support of atheism. However, its interest in secularism was largely limited to the political use it could make of anticlericalism as a “weapon of class struggle.” As rigid affirmation of “Leninism” became a key marker of communist political culture, cadres assigned to the Freethought movement openly mocked the efforts of socialist secularists to import life reform and monism into the movements of “cultural socialism,” which is the subject of Chapter 8.

The last chapter charts political events in the late Weimar Republic, when Germany became a key front in a transnational *Kulturkampf*. The Soviet Union had made the violent suppression of the clergy a key part of the drive for collectivization it launched in 1928. By 1930 its efforts to liquidate organized religion in Russia attracted international attention and led to a propaganda war with the Vatican, in which each side fought via their proxies in

Germany.⁴² The Comintern pushed the KPD to imitate the rude anticlericalism of the Soviet “Godless” campaigns. Anticlericalism proved an attractive means of battering its rival, the SPD, for its quietism on the religious front. This new *Kulturkampf* was also welcomed by the antidemocratic right. Under the banner of “positive Christianity” the National Socialists sought to rally Christian voters to an alliance of all nationalist and Christian forces against an imaginary front of atheists and Jews. Upon taking power in 1933, the NSDAP did not keep all of its promises to the churches, but it did smash secularism and socialism, driving both underground in a series of repressive measures between February and June 1933.

To round off our historical sketch, we conclude that there was a continual reproduction of secularism’s ambivalent relationship to the socialist parties. The leadership of the SPD could never shake the party’s connection to secularist culture, but secularism never achieved its stated aim of becoming the “third column” of the workers’ movement alongside party and unions. This resulted from the strategic ambivalence contained in the party line of 1875 that “religion is a private matter,” which remained in force until 1933 and beyond. The KPD, by contrast, repudiated the notion of religious neutrality and made atheism and anticlericalism mandatory aspects of communist political culture. Yet, despite the soft spot that many individual communists had for elements of secularist culture, by the mid-1920s the KPD refused to allow monist worldview to encroach on its increasingly rigid party doctrine. Discounting small anarcho-syndicalist groupings, the only party that provided secularists a relatively comfortable home in the period under consideration was the USPD between 1917 and 1922. Yet, even there, secularists were not able to win the party for open struggle against the religious establishment. On balance then, the leadership of the socialist parties continued to hold firm to the respective strategies of political secularism, while the organizational matrix supporting worldview secularism persisted in the wider radical working-class milieu throughout the period up to 1933.

Historiographical Implications

This investigation into the relationship of the cultures of socialism and secularism has two principal findings. First, between 1890 and 1933, there was a continual reproduction of a recognizable subculture of red secularism, centered on projects of social renewal through mass education in naturalistic monist worldview, experimentation in life reform communities, and anticlerical action

⁴² Todd Weir, “A European Culture War in the Twentieth Century? Anti-Catholicism and Anti-Bolshevism between Moscow, Berlin, and the Vatican 1922 to 1933,” *Journal of Religious History*, 39/2 (2015): 280–306.

against the state churches. Second, red secularism decisively influenced political events, but often as a disruptive, dissenting force within the socialist parties. Taken together, these findings challenge existing scholarly interpretations of the history of socialism and religion, and they have important implications for the contemporary debates about the role of political secularism in modern history. Let us briefly explore these larger historiographical questions, while leaving treatment of the specialist literature to the respective chapters.

This book stands in continual dialogue with the comprehensive studies of working-class culture and politics written by West German social historians during the late Cold War and in its immediate aftermath. Given their general lack of attention to secularism, one could conclude that it was of little historical significance. However, scholars such as Margaret Anderson have pointed out that this generation of historians gave scant attention to religious questions as a whole, a result of the wide acceptance of secularization theory.⁴³ I agree, but will go further. The secularization thesis did not merely create a blind spot for secularism and religion, it contributed to an underlying narrative used by scholars to tell the history of socialism as a movement that matured over the course of its development from a utopian origin to a pragmatic endpoint. Revealing how this narrative has informed and continues to inform the historical literature is important, if we are to create space for a new interpretation of religion and secularism in modern German history.

One of the insights of secular studies has been that the secularization thesis is not merely a scientific theory that is either true or false. Rather, its invocation has served and serves as an ideological tool to advance certain political interests. This insight can be applied to two debates of the late 1950s, in which liberals and Social Democrats mobilized the emerging secularization thesis in their anticommunist apologetics.⁴⁴ When transatlantic liberal intellectuals, such as sociologists Raymond Aron and Daniel Bell, claimed that the Cold War would naturally resolve in an “end of ideology,” they were both making a predictive claim about the course of history and advocating for the superiority of political pragmatism over stringent ideologies. Bell used orthodox religion as the point of reference to describe total ideologies, as “an all-inclusive system of comprehensive reality . . . a set of beliefs, infused with passion [that] seeks to transform the whole of a way of life . . . a secular

⁴³ Margaret Lavinia Anderson, “The Limits of Secularization: On the Problem of the Catholic Revival in Nineteenth-Century Germany,” *Historical Journal*, 38/3 (1995): 647–70. An exception among the larger social historical studies of Wilhelmine workers is Ritter and Tenfelde, *Arbeiter im Deutschen Kaiserreich*, 747–80.

⁴⁴ On apologetics, see Todd H. Weir, “The Apologetics of Modern Culture Wars: The Case of Weimar Germany,” in *Defending the Faith*, ed. Todd H. Weir and Hugh McLeod (Oxford University Press, 2021).

religion.”⁴⁵ Opposition to exclusive worldviews was also crucial to the transformation of German Social Democracy, which at the Bad Godesberg Congress of 1959 bade farewell to obligatory Marxism and revolution. With this event, the SPD ceased to define itself as a party solely of the working class, thereby opening the way for it to become a broad people’s party, a move generally seen as a precondition to the election of the first postwar Social Democratic chancellor, Willy Brandt, in 1969. The Godesberg Program, which remained in effect until 1989, also took a stand against antireligious agitation and embraced Christianity as a faith fully compatible with socialist ideals. “Socialism,” it declared, does not take a position on “ultimate truths” because it “is no substitute for religion.”⁴⁶ This clear rejection of worldview and anticlericalism meant that Godesberg marked an end to the Gretchen question of Social Democracy.

The “end of ideology” debate and the Godesberg Program provided the apologetic backdrop for that generation of West German historians, who turned the history of the workers’ movement from a marginal area of scholarly inquiry to the centerpiece of the new social history. Many described the long arc of socialist history as a series of developments leading up to the sea change represented by Godesberg. They revisited key party debates, and discovered a learning process amongst a reformist core, whereby practical experience and intellectual maturation led to the repudiation of Marxism, radicalism and utopianism. To give force and self-evidence to this interpretation, some relied directly on the secularization thesis, such as Karl Dietrich Bracher, who wrote in his 1984 book *The Age of Ideologies*:

The relationship of democratic socialism to the intellectual currents of the age has been determined by this process of transformation which started about the turn of the century. Absolute, pseudo-religious ideas about a future socialist order as the ultimate goal and fulfillment of mankind’s progress have been replaced by specific, realizable and political-practice-related programmes. This ‘secularization’ of socialism represented a limitation of the chiliastically coloured claim to exclusiveness of the socialist picture of the world vis-à-vis other intellectual and political currents of the day. In conformity with this we now have programmatic statements such as ‘socialism will always remain a task’ or that its ideas are not a ‘substitute religion’ (Berlin Programme of Action, 1954).⁴⁷

Although Bracher was not a Social Democrat, many of the scholars we will encounter in this study, such as Helga Grebing, Jürgen Kocka, Heinrich

⁴⁵ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, rev. edn (New York: Free Press, 1965), 399–400.

⁴⁶ *Basic Programme of the Social Democratic Party of Germany* (Bonn: Social Democratic Party of Germany, 1959), 5–22.

⁴⁷ Karl Dietrich Bracher, *The Age of Ideologies: A History of Political Thought in the Twentieth Century* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1984), 76–77.

August Winkler and Susanne Miller, were either affiliated with or were members of the SPD. They mobilized motifs of secularization to differentiate between the political positions taken during the Weimar Republic, lauding the reformism and revisionism of the SPD as a sober realism that pointed to Bad Godesberg, while dismissing the radical left as a flight into an increasingly untenable fantasy. In one of the most ambitious works on Weimar socialism, which was published in three volumes in the early 1980s, historian Heinrich August Winkler described the ideology of the left as a “popular Marxism in the form of a pseudoreligious philosophy of salvation.”⁴⁸ In a number of studies of “cultural socialism,” which, as we will see in Chapter 8, was closely interwoven with secularism, historian Dieter Langewiesche argued that the “utopia of the socialist society of the future [in which] the ‘New Man’ would create the ‘New Society’” held little attraction for the educational institutions of the SPD and the unions, which remained characterized by “connection to reality and pragmatism.”⁴⁹ Giving an ironic inversion of Marx’s definition of religion, he concluded that *Kultursozialismus* had little impact on political reality: “At best it could offer consolation, . . . a cultural compensation distant from daily life.”⁵⁰ This use of irony and anticlerical tropes to create a negative foil against which a normal path to socialist political maturity could be constructed was not new. The story of sloughing off of religiously motivated utopian elements and becoming “scientific” had long been a part of party discourse. In 1886 Wilhelm Liebknecht wrote that “Our party gradually puts away childish things and emerges from its years of indiscretion [*Flegeljahren*]. Perhaps expressed more accurately: German Social Democracy developed from a sect into a party.” Five years later, leading party theorist Karl Kautsky called the earlier utopian socialism of Charles Fourier and Henri du Saint-Simon a “childhood disease” of the socialist movement.⁵¹ Thus, we may conclude that secularization has provided a lasting apologetic narrative within the history of socialism, one which began with inner-party debates and continued under the

⁴⁸ Heinrich August Winkler, *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung: Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik 1918 bis 1924*, vol. I (Berlin: J. H. W. Dietz, 1984), 34. Winkler restated his normative interpretation of the history of the SPD centered on Godesberg, in “Görlitz, Godesberg und die Gegenwart: Vor hundert Jahren versuchte die SPD erstmals, sich von einer Arbeiter- in eine Volkspartei zu verwandeln,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Sept. 13, 2021.

⁴⁹ Dieter Langewiesche, “Erwachsenenbildung,” in *Handbuch der deutschen Bildungsgeschichte: Band V 1918–1945*, ed. Heinz-Elmar Tenorth (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1989), 348.

⁵⁰ Dieter Langewiesche, “Die Arbeitswelt in den Zukunftsentwürfen des Weimarer Kultursozialismus,” in *Studien zur Arbeiterkultur*, ed. Albrecht Lehmann (Münster: Coppenrath, 1984), 51–52. See further discussions of Langewiesche’s work in Chapter 8.

⁵¹ Vernon L. Lidtke, *The Outlawed Party: Social Democracy in Germany 1878–1890* (Princeton University Press, 1966), 237; “Kinderkrankheit” in Karl Kautsky, *Das Erfurter Programm: In seinen grundsätzlichen Teil erläutert*, ed. Suzanne Miller (Berlin: J. H. W. Dietz, 1974), point 11.

conditions of the Cold War in which a major role was played by SPD-affiliated historians, whose own partisan positions shone through in their interpretations. In each of the chapters of this book, I will ask how this normative historical interpretation, which I shall call the “Godesberg line,” has informed the mainstream scholarly treatments of each of the dimensions of red secularism. The point is not to dismiss such arguments, but rather to demonstrate how they may have inhibited a full consideration of the dynamics present in the historical record.

Whereas most social historians of socialism showed a general disinterest in religion and secularism, an exception was formed by a small group of West German scholars. Here too, one can speak of an apologetic angle, given that several had clear affiliations to Christianity and more specifically to the Protestant Church. One of the effects of the normalization of Christianity in the wake of the Godesberg Program was that it allowed intellectuals with religious commitments to more easily join the SPD. In the 1960s, theologian Helmut Gollwitzer tried to stimulate a theoretical discussion over the relationship of Marxism and Christianity, and another theologian, Heiner Grote, published a document collection revealing the ambivalent relationship of the early SPD to religion and to secularism.⁵² The most substantive works yet on the relationship of secularism to socialism are the dissertations by Marburg church historian Jochen-Christoph Kaiser on Proletarian Freethought in the Weimar Republic (published 1981) and by Christian educator Sebastian Prüfer on the “religious question” in the early socialist party (published 2002).⁵³ Kaiser demonstrated that the high point of German anticlericalism arrived during the late Weimar Republic. Despite the impressive membership numbers registered by Freethought associations at that time, he concluded that the party secularists failed to attain their chief objective, which was to reverse party neutrality towards religion, leaving them an interesting side road in the history of socialism that was ultimately not taken. Prüfer challenged earlier assumptions about party secularization and argued that there were several options in play regarding the Gretchen question as late as 1890, including efforts by secularists to treat socialism *as* religion, i.e. to fuse it with monist worldview. This option failed and the party settled on socialism *instead of* religion. The studies of Prüfer and Kaiser revealed, for the first time, the recrudescence of secularism within the socialist parties between 1863 and 1933. Yet, ultimately, they both measured the secularists against their stated ambition to become the

⁵² Helmut Gollwitzer, *Die marxistische Religionskritik und der christliche Glaube* (Munich: Siebenstern-Taschenbuch Verlag, 1965), 14–19. Theologian and SPD official Rüdiger Reitz wrote *Christen und Sozialdemokratie: Konsequenzen aus einem Erbe* (Stuttgart: Radius, 1983).

⁵³ Jochen-Christoph Kaiser, *Arbeiterbewegung und organisierte Religionskritik: Proletarische Freidenkerverbände in Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981); Prüfer, *Sozialismus statt Religion*.

“third pillar” of the socialist world, and concluded that they failed. This conclusion indirectly affirmed the prevailing Godesberg line, which assumed that the party’s ability to continually reinforce the policy of “religion is a private matter” was evidence of a process of maturation.

A different analytical line, one rooted in Marxist historical narratives, appears in the studies of socialism undertaken by East German scholars. The East German regime had an ambivalent relationship to red secularism. After the war, it had suppressed efforts to re-establish secularist organizations, even those in the tradition of the Proletarian Freethinkers. However, following the debacle of the uprising of June 17, 1953 that nearly toppled it, the regime mined aspects of secularist tradition, such as the youth confirmation ceremony known as the *Jugendweihe*, in its effort to exert soft power through cultural initiatives. Yet there was no substantive engagement with secularism in the histories of the German working class commissioned by the communist state. Instead, research initiatives – the most important undertaken in Jena by a team directed by Dieter Fricke – interpreted secularism as an expression of “petty bourgeois democracy,” giving it a dual legacy. Depending on the political circumstance, secularism was either selectively assimilated as a progressive heritage of liberal culture, or compartmentalized as a misguided radicalism linked to a dying class, the petty bourgeoisie. In this latter guise, red secularism could be cast as a flight from reality. Only towards the end of the GDR did scholars begin to study the legacy of secularism within socialism.⁵⁴

Another version of secularization appears in the diverse interpretive tradition that has viewed socialism, like other political ideologies, as a substitution for religion. During the interwar period, when sharp culture wars rocked Central Europe, Christian thinkers, such as the Catholics Carl Schmitt, Waldemar Gurian and Erich Voegelin, developed the theory of “political religion,” which saw behind the new totalitarian ideologies heretical quasi-religions bent on the destruction of Christianity. This theory enjoyed a comeback after the end of the Cold War, often promoted by historians standing within the Christian conservative tradition.⁵⁵ In the mid-twentieth century, a number of secular historians and philosophers, many with a Jewish background, such as Walter Benjamin, Karl Löwith and Daniel Bell, also theorized that modern political ideologies were essentially secularized forms of

⁵⁴ Dieter Fricke, “Deutscher Monistenbund,” in *Lexikon zur Parteiengeschichte: Die bürgerlichen und kleinbürgerlichen Parteien und Verbände in Deutschland (1789–1945)*, vol. III (Leipzig: VEB Bibliographisches Institut, 1984), 190–96; Horst Groschopp, *Zwischen Bierabend und Bildungsverein: Zur Kulturarbeit in der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung vor 1914* (Berlin: J. H. W. Dietz, 1985); Michael Rudloff, *Weltanschauungsorganisationen innerhalb der Arbeiterbewegung der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1991).

⁵⁵ Hans Maier and Michael Schäfer, *Totalitarismus und politische Religionen: Konzepte des Diktaturenvergleiches* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1997).

religion.⁵⁶ In 1940, Walter Benjamin conjured up an allegory that can serve here to capture the appeal and limitation of the theory of political religion. He likened Marxism to a chess-playing automaton that won all games, but which was secretly controlled by a dwarf hidden beneath a table. If the automaton was historical materialism, the dwarf, Benjamin concluded, was theology.⁵⁷ The appeal of this allegory is its simple solution to the enigma of totalitarianism, suggesting that the secret of its alluring power and its irrationality lay in the hidden force of religion. The limitation of this approach is that it leads scholars into a historically unverifiable game of continually looking for theological secrets under the table, rather than examining the evidence on the surface of the historical record. There, in full view, historians can find direct connections between religion and socialism, one example being the socialist-secularist culture.

Other scholars interested in the relationship of socialism and religion have placed them in an implicit comparison. Marxist heretics Ernst Bloch and Leszek Kołakowski received wide attention in the 1960s for their theories that socialism and religion sprang from the same anthropological/existential condition, namely human wrestling with the future. According to Bloch, both atheist socialism and Christianity were sustained by the “principle of hope” contained in the “not yet,” while Kołakowski reduced left-wing politics to the simple act of negating existing reality. In 1989 historian Lucian Hölscher compared the future visions of nineteenth-century German socialists and Protestants to arrive at an empirical method for laying out some of the common structures of socialism and secularism.⁵⁸

By examining transnational connections, in particular to the religious politics of the Soviet Union, this book places the German case in a global context. Since the end of the Cold War, a number of investigations have been undertaken into the relationship of religion and communism. Historian Martin Malia claimed that the secret to Bolshevik extremism lay in its philosophical heritage; via Hegel and Marx, it was a secularized form of Christianity. Yuri Slezkine’s survey of the culture of the early Bolsheviks centered on the contentious claim that Bolshevism was a millenarian sect, comparable to the English Radical Reformation, Mormonism, or the Taiping Rebellion. Noteworthy in Malia and Slezkine’s studies, and typical of the theory of

⁵⁶ Sjoerd Griffioen, *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate: Karl Löwith, Hans Blumenberg and Carl Schmitt in Polemical Contexts* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 107–46.

⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), Thesis I.

⁵⁸ Ernst Bloch, *Atheismus im Christentum: Zur Religion des Exodus und des Reichs* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968); Leszek Kolakowski, “The Concept of the Left,” in *The New Left Reader*, ed. Carl Oglesby (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 144–58; Lucian Hölscher, *Weltgericht oder Revolution: Protestantische und sozialistische Zukunftsvorstellungen im deutschen Kaiserreich* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1989).

political religion they implicitly subscribe to, is the lack of engagement with the actual interactions of the Soviet state with religion or secularism.⁵⁹

Other historians of the Soviet Union have delved into the actions of the Soviet equivalent of the Freethinkers, the League of the Godless, which was launched in 1925 and had a fluctuating membership of up to several million before being disbanded in 1941. Daniel Peris has portrayed the organization as a bureaucratic creation, which could be dialed up or down according to the needs of the Bolshevik party. Given the abrupt reversals of Soviet religious policy in the twentieth century, anthropologist Catherine Wanner has argued that antireligion was merely one tool in the Soviet repertoire, and that communist religious policy should best be viewed as a “process of intensifying and relaxing religious expression” driven by the interests of state power to suppress or harness the resources of traditional religion to further its constructions of the sacred state.⁶⁰ This finding establishes a bridge between Soviet policies and the above-mentioned literature on political secularism as an aspect of statecraft. Thomas Schmidt-Lux, Victoria Smolkin and Heléna Tóth have explored the cultural and religious dimensions of the push of all states in the Soviet Bloc in the late 1950s and early 1960s to fulfill the promise of “scientific atheism.”⁶¹ Despite their attentiveness to the presence of the culture of worldview secularism, these studies, because they focus solely on periods in which communist parties had a monopoly of political power, have interpreted worldview secularism as a tool of the political secularism of communist states. Our findings about Germany indicate that historians should also re-examine the formative, if heterodox, role of worldview secularism in early Bolshevism. After all, Vladimir Lenin devoted part of his most substantial philosophical work *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1909) to the refutation of monistic theories propagated by some of his colleagues.⁶² The transnational ties between German

⁵⁹ Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁶⁰ Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); William Husband, *'Godless Communists': Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917–1932* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000); Catherine Wanner, *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012), 8.

⁶¹ Thomas Schmidt-Lux, “Das helle Licht der Wissenschaft: Die Urania, der organisierte Säkularismus und die ostdeutsche Säkularisierung,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 34/1 (2008): 41–72. Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton University Press, 2018); Heléna Tóth, “Zwischen Gott und dem freien Gewissen ist für eine Staatsreligion kein Platz”: Die Namensweihe und politische Religion in der DDR,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 45/1 (2019): 37–69.

⁶² Igor J. Polianski, “Between Hegel and Haeckel: Monistic Worldview, Marxist Philosophy and Biomedicine in Russia and the Soviet Union,” in *Monism: Science, Philosophy, Religion, and the History of a Worldview*, ed. Todd H. Weir (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 197–222.

secularism and global communism also extend beyond Europe; this at least is suggested by Mao Tse Tung's casual remark to a journalist that Germany had produced four great philosophical leaders, "Hegel, Marx, Engels and Haeckel," the last one being the chief theoretician of European secularism.⁶³

The collapse of socialism and communism as political forces and the "return of religion" in the twenty-first century created the conditions for growing scholarly attention to worldview secularism in European history.⁶⁴ However, new studies have not led to a direct challenge to the disenchantment narrative underpinning socialist history, nor have they challenged the teleological assumptions baked into some of the existing genealogies of political secularism. For example, historian Anton Jansson recently examined a debate between Sweden's leading Freethinker and Hjalmar Branting, the leader of the country's socialist party, concluding that social democracy was a force for secularization in modernity precisely because it rejected worldview secularism around 1890.⁶⁵ Rather than framing my study around assumed macrohistorical processes, I look to the stability of those structures that reproduced the conditions of possibility of socialist secularism. Socialist leaders could not ultimately answer the Gretchen question of religion between 1890 and 1933 because of the internal and external relations of competition in which they found themselves. The strong stance taken by all conservatives, including the National Socialists, against red secularism at the end of the Weimar Republic spoke to the power exerted by the force field of religion and secularism at that time. This indicates that the decline of worldview secularism and utopian thinking witnessed in the 1950s was less the result of a gradual learning process within the socialist movement, than it was the result of the massive transformations of politics and religion that began in 1933. In the Epilogue, I briefly explore the postwar history of socialist secularism and offer some hypotheses about its failure to reassert itself as a powerful presence after the collapse of the National Socialist regime.

⁶³ Klaus Mehnert, *Twilight of the Young: The Radical Movements of the 1960s and Their Legacy* (New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston, 1977), 292.

⁶⁴ Katharina Neef, *Die Entstehung der Soziologie aus der Sozialreform eine Fachgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2012). See also Carolin Kosuch (ed.), *Freethinkers in Europe: National and Transnational Secularities, 1789–1920s* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020).

⁶⁵ Anton Jansson, "Friends and Foes: Two Secularisms in late Nineteenth-Century Sweden," in *Freethinkers in Europe*, ed. Kosuch, 155–78.