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Organised Non-Religion and the State in Contemporary Germany: Religion-Related Incorporation and Inner Conflicts

Introduction

The episode "Go God Go" of the American animated sitcom *South Park* imagines a future scenario in the year 2546 in which all humankind has become atheist. However, this development has been accompanied by a schism between different denominations leading to a civil war between them. The United Atheist Alliance, the Unified Atheist League and the Allied Atheist Alliance – an army of hyper intelligent otters – struggle with one another over one big question: under what name should organised atheism be known?

In the United States, an appearance in *South Park* is considered a sign of growing social impact. However, the satirical portrayal of organised non-religion in this episode also points to the limitations that accompany such heightened influence.[1] Ironically mirroring the allegedly 'inevitable' factionalism that arises among religious groups, the fragmentation of atheism through an exhausting fight about trivial matters (such as the best name for its organisation) hampers the formation of a united movement. The ambitious organisations undermine one another and, as a consequence, themselves.[2]

1 I draw on the understanding of 'non-religion' coined by Johannes Quack, "Outline of a Relational Approach to 'Nonreligion'," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 26 (2014): 450, encompassing "all phenomena that are considered to be not religious (according to the constitution of a concrete object of inquiry, a larger discourse on 'religion', or according to a certain definition of 'religion'), while at the same time, they stand in a determinable and relevant relationship to a religious field". Accordingly, I use 'organised non-religion' as a term to refer to a wide range of organisations that explicitly demarcate their self-understanding from religion in a specific discourse on the one hand, but prominently relate this self-understanding to religion on the other. Depending on the respective socio-historical context and situational variables, religion-relatedness can occur in very different forms and shapes, i.e. it can be critical, dialogue-oriented, imitating, or cooperative. See also Stefan Schröder, *Freigeistige Organisationen in Deutschland. Weltanschauliche Entwicklungen und strategische Spannungen nach der Humanistischen Wende* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2018), 21–26.

2 Stephen LeDrew, "Atheism Versus Humanism. Ideological Tensions and Identity Dynamics," in *Atheist Identities. Spaces and Social Contexts*, edited by Lori G. Beaman and Steven Tomlins (Cham: Springer, 2015), 53–68; Steven Kettell, "Divided We Stand. The Politics of the Atheist Movement in the United States," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29, no. 3 (2014): 377–391.

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At first glance, recent developments in organised non-religion in Germany may appear to have taken this *South Park* depiction as an exemplary model: in 2019, the influential Bavarian branch of *Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands* ('German Humanist Association' – HVD) left the national umbrella, changed its name to *Humanistische Vereinigung* ('Humanist Federation' – HV) and opened branches in different German regions, including outside Bavaria.[3] Two years later, a smouldering internal conflict within *Koordinierungsrat Säkularer Organisationen* ('Coordinating Council of Secular Organisations' – KORSO), a superordinate non-religious umbrella organisation, led to the withdrawal of HVD.[4] As a consequence of this, KORSO changed its name into *Zentralrat der Konfessionsfreien* ('Central Council of the Non-affiliated') in the fall of 2021.[5]

However, attending more closely[6] to the history of the current fragmented state of organised non-religion in Germany reveals a more complex picture. The main argument of this chapter is that – although it is undeniable that quarrels over trivial matters and a desire for recognition among stubborn spokespeople play a certain role – the main tensions and conflicts within organised non-religion in Germany originate in different ideas of how to shape and arrange one's own relationship to the state. Proceeding from these ideas, opposing policy strategies are identified, giving rise to two different ideal types of non-religious organisation in Germany.[7] I call these the "social service type" and the "secularist pressure group type". The social service type conceives of organised non-religion as a humanist life stance, competing with collective religious actors in a worldview marketspace. On a political level, the main objective of this type of organisation is to be treated equally with collective religious bodies, especially in terms of state support and funding. The secularist pressure group type promotes organised non-religion as a scientistic *Leitkultur* ('guiding culture' or 'leading culture'). It aims to

3 Ulrike von Chossy, "Zeit für Veränderung," accessed 20 April 2023, https://www.humanistisch.net/36702/zeit-fuer-veraenderung/.

4 Frank Nicolai, "Der Humanistische Verband verlässt den KORSO. Strategische Partnerschaft bleibt bestehen," accessed 20 April 2023, https://hpd.de/artikel/strategische-partnerschaft-bleibt-bestehen-19142.

5 "Zentralrat der Konfessionsfreien," accessed 21 April 2023, https://konfessionsfrei.de/.

6 This investigation is based on the central findings of my dissertation entitled *Freigeistige Organisationen in Deutschland. Weltanschauliche Entwicklungen und strategische Spannungen nach der Humanistischen Wende* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2018), and subsequent fieldwork until 2022. For my dissertation I conducted ethnographic research between 2013 and 2016, composed by 23 semi-structured interviews with organisation officials, 16 participant observations of organisational meetings and events, accompanied by a broad range of found data analysis of archive material and official as well as internal organisational documents.

7 For a more detailed analysis on the two ideal types, see Schröder, *Freigeitige Organisationen*.

protect the political and public sphere from what it considers irrational influences, among them religion, homeopathy, multiculturalism and epistemic relativism. Non-religious secularist pressure group organisations reject any cooperation between the state and religious or non-religious groups for the sake of secularism.[8]

I will argue that this twofold division of organised non-religion in Germany is a result of legal and political re-configurations in the Weimar Republic and the current Federal State of Germany, as well as the reaction to these re-configurations among the organised non-religious. After sketching the situation in pre-Weimar times very briefly, in which the non-religious in Germany were united by a secularist policy, I will describe a selection of legal and political re-configurations in the Weimar Republic and the current Federal State, and show how they changed the potential nature of relations between the organised non-religious and the state in Germany. State cooperation and funding for non-religious organisations became possible on the grounds of legal and political arrangements that were originally created for religious communities. This is how the social service type came into being. I will then turn to the formation and development of *Humanistischer Verband Deutschland* as a prominent example of a social service type non-religious organisation and analyse how its equal treatment policy has repeatedly thrown into question whether secularism can serve as the uniting bond of the organised non-religious in Germany. Other non-religious collectives have been critical of this paradigm shift, and more recently with the formation of *Giordano Bruno Stiftung* ('Giordano Bruno Foundation' – GBS) in 2004, the twofold division of organised non-religion in Germany has taken its current shape. I will end the chapter with a short conclusion and reflection on the future outlook for organised non-religion by returning to the latest developments in Germany mentioned in this introduction.

German Organised Non-Religion in Pre-Weimar Times

Historiography on organised non-religion in Germany usually starts with the separation of free-religious congregations from the protestant lutheran and the roman catholic mainline churches in the 1850s. In both confessional milieus, pro-

8 In my understanding of 'secularism', I refer to José Casanova, "The secular and secularisms," *Social research* 76, no. 4 (2009): 1051–1052. He defines 'secularism' as a "statescraft principle of separation between religious and political authority". This principle is accompanied and legitimised by different types of "political" or "philosophico-historical" secularist ideologies which aim at separating politics respectively the public from religion.

test movements emerged against the conservative renewal of orthodox dogmatic theological positions after the failed German Revolution from 1848/1849. In terms of catholicism, this development was closely linked to Chaplain Johannes Ronge (1813–1887), a critic of celibacy, the prohibition of mixed confessional marriages, the belief in miracles and Marian piety. He was excommunicated for his appeals to initiate a national 'german catholicism' (*Deutschkatholizismus*) independent from Rome. At the same time, protestant theologians and lay preachers in Saxony and Prussia had committed themselves to historical-critical biblical exegesis and scientific rationalism. They formed a network called *Protestantische Freunde* ('Protestant Friends'). All of this happened against the backdrop of the emancipatory and participatory claims of an emerging civil society in Germany. Although most of these groups initially maintained a religious self-identity and considered themselves parts of church reform movements, they gradually developed an anticlerical and naturalist agenda. In an atmosphere of institutional suspension, political discrimination and social exclusion *Deutschkatholiken*, as well as *Protestantische Freunde,* eventually dissociated from the churches, both organisationally and ideologically, and formed the first national free-religious umbrella organisation (*Bund freireligiöser Gemeinden Deutschlands*) in 1859.[9] "At a time when folk belief was not an abstract term, but defined culture, free-religious congregations irritated people in their everyday lives, questioned traditional contexts of meaning, attacked authoritarian legitimations and constituted intellectual circles. [. . .] In their social environments, the free-religious appeared as odd weirdos or firebrands who disturbed a divinely ordained public order".[10]

9 Jochen-Christoph Kaiser, "Organisierter Atheismus im 19. Jahrhundert," in *Atheismus und religiöse Indifferenz*, edited by Christel Gärtner, Detlef Pollack and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 2003), 100–106; Todd H. Weir, "The Secularization of Religious Dissent. Anticlerical Politics and the Freigeistig Movement in Germany 1844–1933," in *Religiosität in der säkularisierten Welt. Theoretische und empirische Beiträge zur Säkularisierungsdebatte in der Religionssoziologie*, edited by Manuel Franzmann, Christel Gärtner and Nicole Köck (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006), 155–176; Ulrich Nanko, "Nationalliberale, sozialistische und völkische Freidenker zwischen 1848 und 1881. Zur Frühgeschichte des organisierten Atheismus im deutschsprachigen Raum," in *Atheismus. Ideologie, Philosophie oder Mentalität?*, edited by Richard Faber and Susanne Lanwerd (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2006), 183–197; Horst Groschopp, *Dissidenten. Freidenker und Kultur in Deutschland,* 2nd edition (Marburg: Tectum, 2011), 99–122.

10 Translated by the author from the German original: "In dieser Zeit, als Volksglaube kein abstrakter Begriff war, sondern Kultur vorgab, brachten die Freigemeinden Irritationen in den Alltag, stellten traditionelle Sinnzusammenhänge in Frage, griffen obrigkeitlich gesetzte Legitimationen an und konstituierten intellektuelle Gesprächskreise. [. . .] In der Umwelt erscheinen die Freireligiösen als weltfremde Sonderlinge oder als friedensstörende Aufwiegler, die eine von Gott gewollte Ordnung in Frage stellen" (Groschopp, *Dissidenten*, 115).

In the following years, internal conflicts within the free-religious movement arose over questions of proximity to christianity and its mainline churches in Germany. Whereas congregational practices and rituals remained church-like, more radical individual members strived to become not only free in their religiosity but also free from religion altogether. They rejected rites of passage and other church rituals as pre-enlightened religious remainders and turned towards a belief in scientific and technological progress. They can be considered pioneers of Germany's freethought movement, although the first national freethinker organisation (*Deutscher Freidenkerbund*) would not be formed until 1881, a year after the World Union of Freethinkers was founded. While a bourgeois wing of German freethought remained a loose circle of eccentric individuals – often writers who hoped for a wider publicity for their publications – left-wing and proletarian freethinker associations like *Verein der Freidenker für Feuerbestattung* ('Freethinker Society for Cremation') or *Zentralverband proletarischer Freidenker Deutschlands* ('Central Association of German Proletarian Freethinkers') were much more influential and would become a pillar of nineteenth and early twentieth century socialism in Germany. Most freethinker associations left traditional congregational structures and practices behind, engaged in popular-scientific public presentations, the publication of journals and periodicals like *Der Freidenker* ('The Freethinker') and ran public libraries and education centres for proletarians and their children. Others combined their secular outlook with scientistic and/or nationalist ideas, and followed the monist vision of Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919) and Wilhelm Ostwald (1853–1932). Still others worried about the moral probity of society and joined ethicist congregations along the lines of the American ethicist leader Felix Adler (1851–1933).[11]

However, putting aside all of these differences and conflicts over questions of worldview, practice and religion-relatedness, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century the organised non-religious in Germany shared a common denominator: the political project of secularism in the sense of a separation of state and church – or religion and politics in general. When the *Weimarer Kartell* ('Weimar trust') was established in 1907 as the first superordinate umbrella organisation in Germany (and as such a predecessor of *Zentralrat der Konfessionsfreien*), its founding document defined three major claims: the free development of the mind and resistance to all kinds of oppression; the separation of school and

11 Groschopp, *Dissidenten*, 129–194; Frank Simon-Ritz, "Kulturelle Modernisierung und Krise des religiösen Bewusstseins. Freireligiöse, Freidenker und Monisten im Kaiserreich," in *Religion im Kaiserreich. Milieus – Mentalitäten – Krisen*, edited by Olaf Blaschke (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996), 457–475.

church; and the complete secularisation of the state.[12] At least two of these three claims reveal a distinct secularist programme. It is striking that the peculiar collection of the *Kartell*'s member organisations – including the buddhist *Mahabodi-Gesellschaft* ('Mahabodi society') and the masonic lodge *Zur Aufgehenden Sonne* ('Up to the Rising Sun') – was held together by exactly this agenda.

This common denominator began to crumble with the political and legal changes in the Weimar Republic after the First World War, and even more so in the Federal State of Germany after the Second World War. This would re-configure the relationship between the non-religious and the state and thereby also the inner relations amongst the organised non-religious in Germany.

Legal and Political Re-Configurations in Germany in the Weimar Republic

The re-configuration of the relationship between the non-religious and the state in Germany is closely linked to the concept of *Weltanschauungsgemeinschaft* ('Wordview association'), coined by the constitutional assembly of the Weimar Constitution, which was passed in 1919 as successor of the constitutional monarchy from the German Empire (1871–1918). The assembly revisited revolutionary democratic ideas of the failed German revolution from 1848/1849, and some of its members were associated with non-religious organisations or shared a related worldview. Seats in the constitutional assembly were distributed by proportional representation, and the social democrats were the strongest faction.[13]

Article 137, paragraph 1 of the Weimar Constitution abolishes the state church of the German Empire. However, *Religionsgesellschaften* ('Religious societies'), above all the mainline churches, still keep a privileged legal status as *Körperschaften des öffentlichen Rechts* ('Foundations under public law') according to Article 137, paragraph 5 of the constitution. Until today, this status guarantees privileges like tax advantages, the right to appoint civil servants and to collect membership dues as taxes, as well as the automatic recognition as provider of the youth welfare sector. Furthermore, it is considered a symbol of public and political recognition and appreciation.[14]

12 Groschopp, *Dissidenten*, 26.

13 Groschopp, *Dissidenten*, 59–60.

14 Christine Mertesdorf, "Weltanschauungsgemeinschaften im deutschen Verfassungsrecht," in *Konfessionsfreie und Grundgesetz*, edited by Horst Groschopp (Aschaffenburg: Alibri, 2010), 81–128.

Far more substantial than this semi-separation of church and state was the integration of paragraph 7 into Article 137 of the Weimar Constitution, in which *Weltanschauungsgemeinschaften* are put on equal legal footing with *Religionsgesellschaften*. Although the term *Weltanschauungsgemeinschaft* is not defined in the constitution and several legal disputes accompanied the question of whether specific organisations could be considered *Weltanschauungsgemeinschaften* or not, quite a few non-religious organisations successfully applied for the status *Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts* in the Weimar Republic and also re-gained it in the Federal Republic of Germany (founded in 1949), after it was revoked for most of them in Nazi Germany.[15] Article 137 of the Weimar constitution was incorporated into Article 140 of the *Grundgesetz*, the constitution of the Federal Republic of German up until today.

In addition to the legal concept of *Weltanschauungsgemeinschaft*, the political principle of subsidiarity is important to understand the re-configuration of the relationship between the non-religious and the state in Germany. It claims that the state should only take responsibility for tasks that subordinate entities like the family or civic organisations cannot fulfil themselves, and this led to the practice of state funding for social and educational services of religious congregations and non-religious *Weltanschauungsgemeinschaften*.[16]

To understand how the legal concept *Weltanschauungsgemeinschaft* and the political principle of subsidiarity influenced and changed the internal dynamics and policy meshwork of organised non-religion in Germany from Weimar times onwards, I will now turn exemplarily to the formation and development of *Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands*, Germany's largest non-religious organisation in terms in membership today.

Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands

The German humanist association *Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands* (HVD) was established in 1993 as a national umbrella by different non-religious social service type organisations from the free-religious and freethinker spectrum on

15 Jochen-Christoph Kaiser, *Arbeiterbewegung und organisierte Religionskritik. Proletarische Freidenkerverbände in Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1981), 279–290.
16 Karl Gabriel, "Subsidiarität als Leitsemantik und Strukturmerkmal des deutschen Wohlfahrtsstaats," in *Religion und Wohlfahrtstaatlichkeit in Deutschland,* edited by Karl Gabriel and Hans-Richard Reuter (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2017), 363–396.

the federal state level. Among them, the 'Berlin Freethinker Association' (*Berliner Freidenkerverband*) was by far the most influential member organisation.[17]

Proletarian freethinker associations had formed a mass movement in the Weimar Republic with a membership of more than half a million. They were particularly attractive because of their range of social services, above all cremation funds and practice independent from church influence. Some of them gained the status of *Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts*. However, they also maintained traditional freethinker agendas by arranging campaigns to leave the churches and editing radical publications and journals like *Der Freidenker*.[18] In Nazi Germany, however, all freethinker organisations were outlawed and their properties were confiscated. Officials were persecuted, imprisoned or even executed. Those who could, left the country. Because of their widespread ties to the labour movement and social-democratic or socialist political ideas and parties, members were criminalised as agitators of 'cultural bolshevism'.[19]

After 1945, freethought in Germany had to start all over. Many central figures from Weimar times had emigrated or died, and in times of general deprivation and hardship, claims for the reimbursement of properties and other material resources were a lost cause. Nevertheless, some tradition-conscious members from Weimar times, many of them socialist and proletarian, rebuilt the old freethinker organisations and even regained the status of *Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts* for some of them, e.g. in Lower Saxony and Northrhine-Westfalia. However, they were unable to return to the societal impact and membership numbers that they enjoyed in Weimar times. Freethinker organisations suffered a harsh decline in membership between the 1960s and 1980s, and officials strived for reorientation.[20] In 1989, Klaus Sühl (*1951), then chairman of *Berliner Freidenkerverband*, proclaimed a new agenda for his organisation in the membership journal *diesseits*:

> Sticking to their traditional agenda, freethinkers are their own worst enemy [. . .]. Either organised freethought makes a fresh start, daring to turn to the wider public with confidence, or it will fall apart. But a fresh start cannot be done with reference to old chestnuts. The renewal of the conditions of the Weimar Republic is neither imaginable nor desirable.

17 Schröder, *Freigeistige Organisationen,* 60–62.

18 Kaiser, *Arbeiterbewegung*; Jochen-Christoph Kaiser, "Sozialdemokratie und 'praktische' Religionskritik. Das Beispiel der Kirchenaustrittsbewegung 1878–1914," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 22 (1982): 263–298.

19 Kaiser, *Arbeiterbewegung*, 330–337; Michael Schmidt, "Verfolgung und Widerstand. Die sozialistische Freidenkerbewegung im Nationalsozialismus," *humanismus aktuell* 11, no. 20 (2007): 55–66.

20 Manfred Isemeyer, "Freigeistige Bewegungen in der Bundesrepublik 1945 bis 1990. Ein Überblick," *humanismus aktuell* 11, no. 20 (2007): 84–95.

> We are all over and done with being an organisation of the labour movement. [. . .] We are the advocacy of the non-church-affiliated people in this country. It is time for us to recognise this and to act accordingly.[21]

This statement summarises the results of consultations among association officials and likeminded colleagues from Germany and abroad. In particular, the spokesmen of secular humanism in Europe at that time, like Levi Fragell[22] from Norway or Rob Tielman[23] from the Netherlands, had a profound impact on the reform process of organised non-religion in Germany that was about to start. I call this process the "humanist turn". Against the backdrop of an emerging pop, leisure and service culture, the Berlin freethinkers left behind their traditional self-understanding as a source of labour advocacy and turned to the life stance market and social service sector for the religiously non-affiliated. This agenda shift brought the association closer to free-religious congregations in other parts of Germany, who themselves suffered membership decline and searched for new partners to emancipate from the dust of nineteenth century free-religious traditions and re-define themselves. Furthermore, the Berlin Freethinker Association soon collaborated with emerging non-religious groups in the new Eastern states of Germany after German reunification in 1990, which engaged particularly in maintaining *Jugendweihe* practice and offered social and counselling services with financial support from the state.[24] In a

21 Translated by the author from the German original: "Mit dem Festhalten an seiner traditionellen Ausrichtung steht sich das Freidenkertum seit Jahrzehnten selbst im Weg [. . .]. Entweder das organisierte Freidenkertum macht einen Neuanfang, wagt es, in die breite Öffentlichkeit und damit in die Offensive zu gehen, oder es löst sich auf. Ein Neubeginn ist aber nicht mit den‚ollen Kamellen' möglich. Die Wiederherstellung Weimarer Zustände ist weder denkbar noch erstrebenswert. Wir sind schon längst keine Organisation der Arbeiterbewegung mehr und auch keine reine Arbeiterorganisation [. . .].Wir sind die Interessenvertretung der kirchlich nicht gebundenen Menschen in diesem Lande. Es wird Zeit, dass wir dies zur Kenntnis nehmen und eine entsprechende Politik machen" (Klaus Sühl, "Jugendweihe, Arbeiterbewegung und Freidenkertum. Abschied und Neubeginn," *diesseits* 3, no. 7 [1989]: 33–35).

22 Levi Fragell, "Die Entwicklung und das Wachstum des Internationalen Humanismus," *diesseits* 3, no. 5 (1989): 22–24.

23 Rob Tielmann, "Ein internationaler Humanismus ist erfolgreich. Interview," *diesseits* 5, no. 16 (1991): 29–30.

24 *Jugendweihe* is a coming of age ritual with roots in late enlightenment traditions. It was constituted as a functional equivalent in ideological and aesthetic aversion of christian confirmations within free-religious and freethinker circles in nineteenth century and originally coincided with school graduation. In the German Democratic Republic, party-independent *Jugendweihen* were prohibited in 1950 for the sake of the sovereignty of the socialist unity party and its appeasement politics with the christian churches. However, increasing ideological tensions with the churches led to a strategy shift of the party which gradually installed the ritual in the whole country as quasi-mandatory part of their state socialism against the 'reactionary influences' of

spirit of optimism, HVD was established in 1993 by the abovementioned freethinker and free-religious associations from several federal states. It grew to become Germany's largest non-religious organisation in terms of membership with about 20,000 members today. At different points in time, five affiliate associations have gained the status of *Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts*.[25]

The response to the secular humanist re-definition of organised non-religion in Germany among the newly defined target group was ambivalent. Whereas there was an obvious demand for non-religious social services, particularly in the new eastern states, the life stance agenda to constitute humanism as a congregational alternative to religious providers did not attract much attention. Most of the people who sent their children to humanist kindergartens or accessed humanist counselling or hospice services had no interest in joining HVD as members – and the association has never made this a condition. This has led to a situation in which far more people make use of humanist services than membership numbers indicate: over 70,000 children in Berlin and Brandenburg alone attend *Humanistische Lebenskunde* ('Humanist Life Skills'), a confessional humanist school subject, whereas membership numbers stagnate at around 20,000 in all Germany. The problem with this situation for the association is that providing social services is expensive and the amount recouped through annual membership fees is not even close to covering the cost of them. This is why – based on a self-understanding as *Weltanschauungsgemeinschaft* and with reference to the political principle of subsidiarity – HVD increasingly turned to the state for funding and reimbursement of costs for staff and other resources – with varying success. In particular, state governments with an involvement of the Christian Democratic Party and in regions with a christian majority population are far from interested in cooperating with 'atheists'. In Berlin, however, civic providers for the non-religious majority – around 70 percent of the population in Berlin is religiously non-affiliated – were desperately needed in the early 1990s. The Berlin HVD learned to respond to this need and perfected its role as partner of the state in social and educational issues over the years. Today, it operates as social

the youth by the churches. In the German Federal Republic, the term *Jugendweihe* was quickly associated with a communist state-festivity of the German Democratic Republic and came under pressure to demonstrate legitimacy. After German reunification, however, *Jugendweihen* provided by non-religious organisations have had a surprising renaissance, especially in the eastern parts of Germany. Up until today, they are considered a natural part of personal and family biographies for people with German Democratic Republic history. Today's *Jugendweihen* have shed their political ballast. See also Stefan Schröder, "Zwischen DDR-Erbe, Familienfest und Konfirmations-Äquivalent. Die politische Re-Definition der Jugendweihe in Deutschland am Beispiel der Jugendfeier des Humanistischen Verbandes Deutschlands," *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 2 (2018): 61–80.

25 Schröder, *Freigeistige Organisationen*, 52–70.

agency for four hospices, a college of education, several counselling and welfare centres for youths and family. Furthermore, it runs around 30 preschools and holds responsibility for the abovementioned school subject *Humanistische Lebenskunde*. It employs 1,200 professionals, most of them preschool or *Humanistische Lebenskunde* teachers. Its annual budget amounts to more than €50 million, most of which is granted by the state government of Berlin.[26]

By doing so, the state government incorporates HVD into political and legal arrangements originally designed for religious communities, particularly the mainline churches.[27] Looking at state government decisions in favour of and against funding the association, there is an obvious tendency for funding to be granted only if similar arrangements with churches and other religious groups exist.[28] To give just two examples: when, in 1999, HVD applied for the funding of its *Jugendweihe* practice in Berlin, the Senate denied it on the grounds that churches would not get funding for their confirmations either.[29] In addition, a proposal for establishing a humanist elementary school in Bavaria was only approved after the Bavarian branch HVD changed its rationale from a reform pedagogic to a confessional logic.[30] Within the association, this has led to processes of structural isomorphy,[31] in which the organisation learned to argue like a religious association and adjusted its organisational structure and practice to be increasingly church-like. A HVD official told me in an interview: "We want the same status the churches have. This is our main strategic goal in Germany, an equal treatment in all areas and an all-encompassing service for religiously non-affiliated people in every condition of life, as it exists for the religious people".[32] With regard to the concept of 'religion-

26 Schröder, *Freigeistige Organisationen*, 146–173.

27 The idea that organisational structures and collective identities of organisations are regulated by institutional forms of public incorporation systems is prominently suggested by Yasemin N. Soysal, *Limits of Citizenship. Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

28 Schröder, *Freigeistige Organisationen*, 215–222.

29 Norbert Kunz, "Auf hoher See und vor Gericht ist man in Gottes Hand," *diesseits* 13, no. 48 (1999): 18–19.

30 Interview with *Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands* official, 14 June 2013.

31 The concept of 'structural isomorphy' refers to processes of adaptation to discursive and legal arrangements. See Mark C. Bodenstein, "Institutionalisierung des Islam zur Integration von Muslimen," in *Die Rolle der Religion im Integrationsprozess. Die deutsche Islamdebatte,* edited by Bülent Ucar (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010), 349–364; Friederike Böllmann, *Organisation und Legitimation der Interessen von Religionsgemeinschaften in der Europäischen Politischen Öffentlichkeit. Eine Quantitativ-Qualitative Analyse von Europäisierung als Lernprozess in Religionsorganisationen* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2010).

32 Translated by the author from the German original: "Wir wollen den gleichen Status haben wie die Kirchen. Und das ist unser großes strategisches Ziel auch in Deutschland, die volle Gleich-

relatedness' coined by Quack,[33] this reasoning and practice can be described as religion-imitating. By contrast, the relevance of anti-religious criticism has become diminished in the official self-understanding of HVD, as this interview statement of another official shows: "I do not see a focus on criticism of religion in our agenda these days. We already have a widely secular society. The conditions have clearly changed compared to the situation 50 or 60 years ago".[34]

Giordano Bruno Stiftung

Not everyone on the German non-religious scene approved of the humanist turn and the religion-imitating policy of HVD. When chairmen Michael Schmidt Salomon (*1967) and Herbert Steffen (1934–2022) founded *Giordano Bruno Stiftung* ('Giordano Bruno Foundation' – GBS) in 2004 – in the wake of the publications of the so-called 'new atheists' in the US – they clearly hit a nerve among those who regarded criticism of religion as crucial part and binding agenda of organised non-religion.[35] The foundation closed the ideological gap of freethought that organisations like *Berliner Freidenkerverband* left when they turned towards secular humanism. It has won several famous public and academic individuals over to its advisory committee and supports around 60 local and campus grassroots groups that have been established all over German-speaking Europe. Furthermore, it co-founded a very active publicist institution called *Humanistischer Pressedienst* ('Humanist media service'), as well as *Forschungsgruppe Weltanschauungen in Deutschland*, a research group specialising in investigations concerning secular worldviews and *Institut für Weltanschauungsrecht*, an institute for legal questions and the discrimination of the non-religious population.[36]

behandlung und ein umfassendes Angebot für konfessionsfreie Menschen in allen Lebenslagen, so wie es das gibt für die religiösen Menschen" (interview with *Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands* official, 24 May 2013).

33 See Quack, *Outline*.

34 Translated by the author from the German original: "Aber ansonsten sehe ich Religionskritik eigentlich gar nicht mehr so stark im Fokus heutzutage, weil wir eben schon eine weitgehend säkulare Gesellschaft haben. Es hat sich ja doch deutlich verändert gegenüber der Lage von vor 50 oder 60 Jahren" (interview with *Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands* official, 22 April 2013).

35 Amarnath Amarasingam, ed., *Religion and the New Atheism. A Critical Appraisal* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Stefan Schröder, "Organized New Atheism in Germany?," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 32, no. 1 (2017): 33–49.

36 Schröder, *Freigeistige Organisationen*, 60–70.

The foundation has caused a media-effective public stir by initiating or supporting provocative campaigns, among them, the two German atheist bus campaigns. Similar to an initiative by British humanists and atheists around Richard Dawkins a few years earlier, in May and June 2009, a bus with the inscription "(Probably) there is no god. A fulfilled life does not need religious belief" toured through Germany,[37] providing information and promotional material for GBS and similar organisations.[38] In 2019, a second bus campaign with the slogan "State of the church? No, thank you!" was organised to inform about and stimulate public protest against what the foundation considers unconstitutional entanglements between the state and the christian churches in Germany.[39] Following GBS officials, there should be no cooperation with or public funding of religious communities or *Weltanschauunsgemeinschaften* at all. Instead, they call for a secularist policy in the sense of a strict separation between religion and politics.[40]

Another campaign waged by GBS is the "Evo-Kids" project. It was initiated to demand the inclusion of evolution in the curricula of primary schools in Germany and to find appropriate ways of teaching this subject for young children. The foundation hosted two open conferences in the city of Giessen, bringing together teachers, professors, students and politicians to discuss the issue and create public attention for it through broad media coverage. In spring 2014, an "Evo-Kids" website with background information and educational material went online.[41] A pilot experiment was hosted in an elementary school in the city of Dusseldorf – again orchestrated in a suitable way to be covered by a wide range of media channels. In a public resolution that was passed at the second "Evo Kids" conference, it says:

> Considering the fundamental importance of an understanding of evolution for the development of a modern worldview, it is disconcerting that children learn so little about this topic in primary schools – particularly in view of the fact that creation myths – which can be misconstrued without any knowledge on evolution – are part of school curricula. From a pedagogical viewpoint, there is no justification for that. Public schools should not influence their pupils one-sidedly in line with a specific religion or *Weltanschauung*, but should provide them with access to central scientific knowledge![42]

37 Translated by the author from the German original: "Es gibt (mit an Sicherheit grenzender Wahrscheinlichkeit) keinen Gott. Ein erfülltes Leben braucht keinen Glauben".

38 Giordano Bruno Stiftung, *Tätigkeitsbericht 2009* (Mastershausen: Eigenverlag, 2010), 16.

39 Translated by the author from the German original: "Kirchenstaat? Nein danke!"

40 Giordano Bruno Stiftung, "Am Puls der Zeit. Interview mit der Juristin Jaqueline Neumann," *Bruno. Das Jahresmagazin der Giordano Bruno Stiftung* (2019), 32–33, accessed 21 April 2023, https://www.giordano-bruno-stiftung.de/bruno-jahresmagazin.

41 "Das Evokids-Projekt", accessed 20 April 2023, https://evokids.de/.

42 Translated by the author from the German original: "Angesichts der fundamentalen Bedeutung des Evolutionsverständnisses für die Entwicklung eines zeitgemäßen Weltbildes ist es befremdlich,

As these campaigns illustrate, GBS advocates strict secularism on a policy level. They see the cooperation between the state and religious communities as a violation of the separation of religion and politics that should be constitutional for a modern secular state. This is why they look at the strategy of HVD to strive for equal treatment with the mainline churches with scepticism and disconcertion. The problem for them is not that the humanist association provides social services for the non-religious (by contrast, they explicitly support this practice and stress its importance) but that the association accepts public funding and support from the state in order to do so. Indeed, whether intended or not, the church-oriented structural isomorphy of HVD and similar organisations contributes to a ratification and stabilisation of the German religio-political incorporation system. Foundation officials oppose public funding for religious communities and *Weltanschauungsgemeinschaften* for using tax money of the unaffiliated for their purposes. Even more so, confessional instruction at public schools is a thorn in their side. They argue that it leads to a confessional division of society instead of making a contribution to integration. The existence of a secular humanist school subject did not make this situation better in any way – quite the contrary. A foundation official told me in an interview:

> I think it is wrong to separate kids based on confession, even if there is a 'humanist confession', if you want to call it that. [. . .] [I think] that *Lebenskunde* could be replaced by another school subject like ethics for all pupils. [. . .] For me, the appropriate approach would be that education at schools is not influenced by worldviews, and this could be accomplished in an ethics school subject. *Humanistische Lebenskunde* would be simply redundant if there was an adequate ethics school subject. [. . .] This is why it would not be a great loss if *Lebenskunde* ceased to exist.[43]

dass Kinder in der Grundschule so wenig über dieses Thema erfahren – zumal im Unterricht oftmals Schöpfungsmythen behandelt werden, die ohne Vorwissen zur Evolution leicht fehlgedeutet werden können. Pädagogisch ist dies nicht zu rechtfertigen. Schließlich sollen öffentliche Schulen ihre Schülerinnen und Schüler nicht einseitig im Sinne einer bestimmten Religion oder Weltanschauung beeinflussen, sondern ihnen Zugang zu den zentralen Erkenntnissen der Wissenschaft ermöglichen" (Das Evokids-Projekt, "Resolution 'Evolutionsunterricht in der Grundschule' [verabschiedet am 1.11.2015 in der Hermann-Hoffmann-Akademie Gießen]," accessed 20 April 2023, https://evokids.de/content/resolution-evolution-grundschule#Resolutionstext).

43 Translated by the author from the German original: "Und trotzdem halte ich es für falsch, die Kinder zu trennen nach Konfessionen. Auch nach der humanistischen Konfession, wenn man das so nennen darf. [Ich denke], dass der Lebenskundeunterricht sich problemlos ersetzen ließe durch einen Ethikunterricht. [. . .] Der richtigere Ansatz wäre meines Erachtens, dass weltanschauliche, ungebundene weltanschauliche Bildung unbedingt nötig ist an Schulen, und zwar in Form eines Ethikunterrichts. Und damit wäre der Unterricht des HVD nicht mehr gültig. [. . .] Humanistische Lebenskunde wäre dann einfach redundant, wenn es einen guten Ethikunterricht

In the final analysis of such claims for secularism, their implementation would put an end to large segments of the practice of HVD. I consider this secularist policy not only different, but contrary to the equal treatment agenda of the humanist association and similar social service type non-religious organisations. Sparking off in contradictory notions of how the non-religious should relate to the state, the two policies create an either/or-dichotomy.

Conclusion

Historically, there have always been tensions and conflicts within organised non-religion in Germany over questions of worldview, practice and religion-relatedness. Whereas these differences, for example, between a pluralist and a critical stance on religion or between a life stance- or activism-based practice and form of organisation can be traced back to the nineteenth century, the question of whether or not non-religious organisations should turn to state support and be incorporated into political and legal arrangements originally designed for religious communities, is a relatively new issue of debate. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the political and legal context did not provide for such an incorporation into religion-related arrangements. Accordingly, the policy of non-religious organisations was more or less uniformly secularist and aimed for a separation of church and state. This began to change in the Weimar Republic and especially after World War Two. New plurality-based legal and political arrangements emerged, among them the legal concept of *Weltanschauungsgemeinschaft* and the political principle of subsidiarity, and some non-religious organisations adapted an equal treatment policy. Related claims revoked the political project of secularism as common denominator of organised non-religion. The re-configuration of the political and legal arrangements in Germany encroached upon the non-religious community in Germany and created a deep division within it.

The continuous fragmentation of organised non-religion in Germany mentioned in the introduction can only be understood in the light of this re-configuration. After years of frustration by failed attempts to unite different non-religious groups within the *Koordinierungsrat Säkularer Organisationen* ('Coordinating Council of Secular Organisations'), the withdrawal of HVD seems to have released the council from obstructing policies and quarrels, allowing it to set a straightforward agenda in a secularist direction. The name of the organisation was changed to *Zentralrat der Kon-*

gäbe. [. . .] Deswegen wäre es auch nicht schlimm, wenn er nicht mehr da wäre" (interview with *Giordano Bruno Stiftung* official, 30 September 2014).

fessionsfreien ('Central Committee of the Non-affiliated' – KORSO), a paid spokesman was added to the executive board and the self-understanding of being a secularist lobby organisation was explicitly emphasised in a publicity-effective launch of the *Zentralrat* in spring 2022 – a self-understanding that HVD, in the years of its membership in KORSO, would always block.[44] On the website of the *Zentralrat* it reads:

> We are [. . .] financially independent. We do not want public funding, but the recognition of civil rights. This is why we accompany Germany's progress to become a consequently secular state [. . .]. Numerous privileges and billions of tax money for organised beliefs are neither constitutional nor timely [. . .]. The implementation of the secular values of our constitution is part of the project to complete enlightenment.[45]

At the other end of the policy spectrum, the Bavarian branch of HVD changed its name to *Humanistische Vereinigung* ('Humanist federation' – HV) and left the national umbrella because for them, the association's policy was still too close to secularist positions.[46] Now it pursues a radical equal treatment policy, including claims for a nationwide establishment of humanist private schools and a confessional humanist school subject, as well as the application of the ecclesiastical employment law in Germany to some of its staff – all of these practices being based on religion-related legal arrangements that the *Zentralrat der Konfessionsfreien* would like to abolish altogether. In an interview with me, an organisation official of HV described the withdrawal from HVD as a "relief" from unwelcome compromises.[47]

This division of political projects and organisational ideal types is not (only) a fight about trivial matters, like finding the right name for an organisation. It is the result of controversies on essential questions of organisational policy that are deeply interwoven with different strategies of how to relate the non-religious to the state.

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44 Zentralrat der Konfessionsfreien, "Pressekonferenz. Zentralrat der Konfessionsfreien e.V.," accessed 21 April 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ds1WPUSl_ac.

45 Translated by the author from the German original: "Wir sind [. . .] finanziell unabhängig. Wir wollen keine Fördergelder, sondern die Beachtung der Grundrechte. Deshalb begleiten wir Deutschlands Weiterentwicklung zu einem konsequent säkularen Staat. [. . .] Zahlreiche Sonderrechte und jährliche Steuermilliarden für den organisierten Glauben sind weder verfassungs- noch zeitgemäß. Die Umsetzung der säkularen Werte der Verfassung ist Teil des 'unvollendeten Projekts der Aufklärung'" (Zentralrat der Konfessionsfreien, "Unsere politische Agenda", accessed 21 April 2023, https://konfessionsfrei.de/saekulare-ampel/).

46 von Chossy, *Zeit für Veränderung*.

47 Translated by the author from the German original: "Befreiung," interview with *Humanistische Vereinigung* official, 19 July 2021.