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THE RISE AND FALL
OF RELIGION IN EAST
GERMAN OFFENDER
REHABILITATION
PROGRAMMES

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Collapse and Creation: the rise and fall of religion in East German offender rehabilitation programmes¹

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Abstract

German unification has been hugely debated among politicians and intellectuals who all seem to agree that its impact on the whole country was probably underestimated. The aim of this paper is to suggest that by going its own path, by appropriating the changes, East Germans have found a way of affirming a new identity which, in some aspects, represents continuity with the socialist past while in other aspects breaks with it. This text draws on the example of offender rehabilitation programmes in Berlin, Brandenburg, and Saxony-Anhalt as a product of the interplay of religious and secular institutions that emerged after 1989. The paper shows the particular understanding of religion amid secularity dominant in Eastern Germany. The author argues that such an understanding has most powerfully come up during the 1990s, a time that is often mentioned nowadays in the narratives of East Germans and in those of the analysed institutions.

¹ I am very grateful to Franz von Benda-Beckmann, Friederike Fleischer, Bettina Mann, Małgorzata Rajtar, and Esther Peperkamp for their insightful comments on previous versions of this text. They have allowed me to correct numerous inaccuracies. I, alone, am entirely responsible for the remaining ones.

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Introduction

Some years after the collapse of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), one could feel both in the East and the West a certain disappointment about the many aims that the “silent revolution” had failed to achieve. While Western social scientists wrote about what the East German society still missed before it could successfully walk the path of progress (Lepenies 1992, Offe 1994, Brockmann 2006), numerous East Germans complained about their being colonised by the West and feeling treated as “second rate citizens” (Kollmorgen 2005: 68 ff., see Betts 2000: 732–734 for a review of the literature). Today, almost 20 years after reunification, it has become clear that the changes in East German society cannot simply be understood negatively in terms of loss or failure. On the contrary, I argue that there is room for an appreciation of this society as being characterised by an identity of its own, which was strongly forged during the 1990s. This identity is mirrored in social institutions and in the relation to religion and changes according to a variety of factors, the Western influence being only one of them. An East German identity *sui generis* comes at the forefront for instance when looking at the numerous new associations that were created for social help during the 1990s, mostly in the third sector, to the point that some authors consider it “a veritable association boom” (Anheier, Priller and Zimmer 2000: 142). This, obviously, does not mean that *all* East Germans have exactly the same identity, but that a common reference has developed, which they use more or less. In this paper I concentrate on those East Germans who became increasingly active in the third sector after the collapse of state socialism, mostly after an intense experience at the end of the 1980s in political activity sheltered by the churches.

As a consequence of the interpretation of unification as a failure, in particular an economic failure, the cliché of the *Jammerossi* developed among Westerners, that is, of an East German constantly complaining about his lost living standard and impossible to satisfy. This interpretation and cliché completely overshadows the positive and constructive attitude of a large number of East Germans, in particular those within the third sector. My argument is that such an attitude can only be understood by making the effort of following, in a genealogical mode, the way in which, under certain conditions, unification came to be used as a starting point for a new life. I therefore suggest looking more closely at those East German actors who re-invented their lives and who constructed institutions by conceiving the aftermath of the *Wende* as their myth of origin.

During my one-year fieldwork in the realm of social help to ex-offenders in Berlin, Brandenburg, and Saxony-Anhalt I could find numerous such actors.³ I inquired into various secular and religious associations proposing programmes of rehabilitation to ex-offenders and realised that, for social workers, the collective experience and shared memory of the *Wendezeit*⁴ shaped their self-perception and ethically oriented their action. This realm was affected by major changes, one of which is linked to religion (cf. Anheier and Priller 1991). Religious institutions entered the realm of social help massively as qualified providers of social services and were appropriated by East Germans in their own way.

³ Fieldwork was conducted as part of the post-doctoral project *Rehabilitating Ex-Offenders in Eastern Germany: the interplay of religious and secular values* lasting from 2006 to 2009 at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale, Germany.

⁴ The notion *Wendezeit* indicates the years around the political turn of 1989 and the early 1990s. In October 1989 mass protest demonstrations accelerated the collapse of the GDR which came officially to an end only at the end of 1990 with the Unification Treaty. During the following years the institutional panorama was still to be defined and initiatives emerged all over. During all these years, to which one can subjectively refer as *Wendezeit*, while much collapsed, much was created, too.

Starting from this observation, I will propose a reflection on the articulation of secular politics, religion, collective memory, and identity in Eastern Germany. I shall point to the differences and the similarities the various institutions display in the way they relate to socialist times and to the *Wendezeit* itself. My argument will be that to these actors the *Wendezeit* has been a mythical time. It is told as a sacred story, through rituals it is made concrete (Malinowski 1936), and thereby it sustains their collective memory (Assmann 2007 [2000]) and re-enacts their identity.

As Wolfgang Engler (2002: 22) points out, the citizens of the GDR did not call themselves “East Germans” but started to do so only years after the fall of communism. They have created this new identification by using an existing collective way of thinking and behaving in society. Being East German means having a certain perspective on the world; a perspective impregnated by the experience of abrupt political and social change.

In a first step, I look back at the socialist period and at the changes the *Wende* introduced in the realm of religion and of offender rehabilitation. I shall consider more closely not only state-church relations *in abstracto* but also a further dimension of this structural pair: the political dimension of religion in civil activism, since it is this realm that gave actors the foundation for their mythical elaboration.

Secondly, I shall present some of the empirical cases studied in my fieldwork: despite the confessional and secular-religious differences there are also clear analogies when it comes to the reference to the *Wende*.

The Location of Religion before 1989

In contemporary literature, the development of the relationships between the churches and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) is mainly interpreted in two radically contrasting ways (Heinecke 2002). One claim is that the churches could keep a certain independence from the state and were not submitted to its complete control.⁵ The opposite thesis argues instead that the state of the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED – Socialist Unity Party of Germany) was totalitarian and that the churches were submitted entirely to its domination.⁶ As it appears, a variety of historical facts concerning the fate of religion at the time can be mentioned to support either of the two views. Differently from the Soviet case, there was, for instance, an authorised (though tightly controlled) Christian Party in the GDR, which was, however, not necessarily in step with the church. In the same vain, a “Luther commemoration year” was celebrated – actually, it seems no exaggeration to suggest that Martin Luther was one of the historical heroes of the German socialist ‘nation’. The eight different Protestant Churches on the territory of the GDR were obliged to unite in a *Bund* (coalition) with a clearly sympathetic attitude towards Marxism in 1969. Their leitmotiv became “Church in Socialism”, that is, neither against nor with it (Baum 1996).

On the other hand, (this time similarly to the Soviet Union) numerous churches were destroyed for state purposes such as the construction of the Berlin wall. And pastors, although members of an institution not only officially recognised by the state but also actively collaborating with it, were spied on no less by the state police than ordinary citizens were.

⁵ This was particularly true by the end of the GDR. In the 1980s, thousands of persons still worked full-time for the churches, be it as active clergy or in hospitals, homes for the mentally and physically disabled, old age homes, orphanages, or nurseries. Six of the state universities included a faculty of ‘Protestant Theology’. As far as Protestant faculties are concerned, the salaries from 1949 through 1989 were paid out of the communist state budget (Ramet 1998).

⁶ Gerhard Besier has provocatively contributed to this debate. Cf. for instance Besier 1991, 1995a and 1995b.

A way of resolving the problem posed by the existence of two so different understandings of the role of religion in the GDR consists in unpacking the notions of ‘church’ and ‘religion’. If, instead of looking at ‘church-state relationships’ or ‘religion in the GDR’ generally, we decompose these entities into separate, more easily analysable segments, we gain a more subtle understanding of the issue at stake. For instance does the temporal dimension play an important role – as a matter of fact, the situation of religion in the GDR changed over time and according to the various leaders who were in place (both in the party and in the church): some were rather confrontational, others looked for reciprocal adjustments. Distinguishing the different hierarchical levels composing a ‘church’, for instance single parishes or the consistory office, also nuances the perspective, so does considering the socio-political conditions of East German society and the single denominations.

My point is that, while the general orientation of the socialist government (or regime) was atheistic, its relationship to churches and religious communities was diversified: it changed over time, from place to place and from community to community.⁷

As far as the Protestant church (affiliation decreased from 80 to about 25 per cent of the population during the GDR) is concerned, the situation was highly complex. While, immediately after the war, in the years of the Soviet occupation zone, the government had a rather positive attitude towards the church, it very quickly implemented hostile policies to prevent the church from having any influence upon society. The membership rates and the participation rates decreased remarkably. From time to time, such as in 1958 with the new church-state agreements, the government softened the relationship with the church, but strong conflicts still broke out regularly, for instance in 1962 when military service became compulsory and universal.

Towards the end of the GDR, the Protestant church played a crucial political role in civil activism.⁸ A church-based opposition to the government developed around a large number of political fields: international politics (peace, NATO, civil service), ecological concerns (pollution, nuclear energy), gender issues (abortion, homosexuality), human rights (political prisoners, freedom of speech and movement), etc. Whereas the churches in the West had developed similar mobilisations already in the aftermath of May 1968, they never went as far in the secular expressions of these political concerns as Eastern parishes did. In the 1980s, the latter started to attract subgroups such as punks, anarchists, and hippies and became very active in mobilising people around the issue of political prisoners.⁹

The relation between the church directorate, closely controlled by the SED, and these movements was very complicated. Depending on the type of protest and its content, the church directorate would support, depoliticise, individualise, or even contribute to state repression (for instance by firing pastors). To some extent, as Christian Joppke straightforwardly argues, “the regime learned to use the Protestant Church as a device to neutralise domestic discontent and opposition. Opposition was tolerated as long as it remained within the church, but it faced stiff persecution as soon as it stepped outside the church” (1995: 83). The SED would, however, also extend its repression to within church groups by infiltrating them and manipulating the “tensions within the

⁷ Wappler (2007) illustrates this point drawing on the example of schools in one of the Christian enclaves of the former GDR.

⁸ This importance is illustrated, for instance, by the fact that in a manual on opposition movements in the GDR (Neubert 2000) more than two thirds of the pages are dedicated to groups linked to churches (mostly Protestant but also Catholic).

⁹ The banners of the demonstrations organised around Berlin churches in 1989 read, among other things, “*Mahnwache und Fürbitte für die zu Unrecht Inhaftierten*”. Cf. Neubert 2000 and the long interviews with various political activists made in 1990 and 1992 in Pollack, Findeis and Schilling 1994.

church”¹⁰, until certain political groups were expelled from the parishes, as one former activist remembers (Westendorff 2007: 19)¹¹. Still, as many informants repeatedly told me, the churches were the only places for them where cultural and political activity could be carried out freely on a large scale, to the point that church engagement and even religion more generally became synonymous of political action in the view of numerous activists.¹² In the churches, society found, in practical terms, its political locus. According to an activist of the time the reason was simple: “No group wanted to renounce the public space church in a state where there was no other public space where one could present one’s own concerns.” (Grimm 2007: 26). As a response, the government increasingly labelled church activities as politically suspicious.

Hence, these mobilisations and meetings had a secular-religious character: their frame was certainly religious but the content was rather political, that is, secular. However, since the content was also communicated in religious terms – as the famous slogan “*Schwerter zu Pflugscharen*”¹³ exemplifies – it was and still is very difficult to precisely disentangle whether religion had adapted to the secular context or whether the secular values, present in politics, had been translated into religious terms. A number of initiatives, such as the *Friedenswerkstatt* (peace workshop), which started in different towns of the GDR in the early 1980s, were on the thin line between religious and secular concerns. These initiatives, branding pacifist topics, gathered large crowds that shared, in very collective ways, information, points of view, and experiences and formulated concrete political alternatives. The peace workshops took place in different towns – but always in Protestant churches.

On occasions such as these meetings, the secular and the religious modulated each other. In the *Erlöserkirche* in Berlin Lichtenberg, for instance, a religious service was always celebrated at the beginning and at the end of the *Friedenswerkstatt*. A common memory developed in collective “effervescence” (Durkheim 1996: 134), which would be the ground for mythical elaborations and value formation. As the theologian Pahnke, who was one participant, writes: “We felt it right away: we are ahead of time! Something is starting that will bring along change” (2007: 23). After the *Wende*, new groups arose around the same individuals and aimed at intervening in the many problems that emerged with unification. Again Pahnke asserts that the experience of the peace workshops allowed groups such as *Neues Forum*, *Demokratischer Aufbruch* and *Sozialdemokratische Partei* (ibid.) to construct the new East after 1989. The reference to and remembrance of the time spent in common with innumerable others around the same concerns still contributes to endowing identity to socially active associations and individuals nowadays.

As far as the Catholic Church (affiliation decreased from 10 to about 5 per cent of the population during the GDR) is concerned, there were significant peculiarities. It never really recognised neither the territorial separation nor the socialist regime and, as Goeckel (1990) rightly points out, strongly relied on the ties with its stronger West German part and with the Vatican. As Gregory Baum writes, “the majority of Catholics had settled in the GDR after World War II, arriving from

¹⁰ This and the following quotations from literature or interviews in German are my translation.

¹¹ I met most of the activists I here quote from their texts published in *Horch und Guck. Historisch-literarische Zeitschrift des Bürgerkomitees „15. Januar“ e.V.* during commemorative celebrations of events linked to the *Wende*, such as the 25th anniversary of the *Friedenswerkstätte*, peace workshops. I shall describe it in more detail later on in the text.

¹² Cf. among others Müller 1997: 84 ff.

¹³ This is a citation of the prophets Micah’s and Jesaja’s verse “swords into plowshares” (Mic 4:3/Jes 2:2–5). The Soviet Union offered a statue symbolising this metaphor to the United Nations in the 1950s. The civil movements chose it to symbolise the common concerns of religious and atheist defenders of pacifism.

German territories beyond the border, especially from Silesia” (1996: xv). Through *Caritas*¹⁴, the Catholic Church provided help to the unemployed, homeless, poor people, families of imprisoned persons, and to persons who had applied to leave the GDR (Kösters 2001). Catholic communities lived in diaspora-similar conditions, which often strengthened the individuals’ capacity to face scrutiny from the state. The members of the communities were mostly bound by strong ties, in particular if they lived in one of the enclaves in Eastern Germany, such as Eichsfeld or Oberlausitz. Some of the employees of the *Caritas* offender rehabilitation programme in Frankfurt/Oder shared this background. When I interviewed one of them in East Berlin in January 2007 he was in his forties. For him, living in an enclave meant, for instance, that when the *Jugendweihe* (youth consecration)¹⁵ was organised, he was not the only pupil to refuse: “we were two in each classroom [pause] that was a progression, wasn’t it? [laughs] (...) it was still difficult but we were three [for instance] [pause]”.¹⁶

On a political level, most Catholics followed the principle of political abstinence towards the regime (for instance to ignore the socialist youth consecration) and had a standoffish attitude towards the Lutheran church. The SED disliked any political abstinence and therefore put pressure on Catholics in different ways. The international profile of the Catholic Church – in particular the fact that the Vatican is an independent state and largely appreciated as a mediator in international diplomatic relations - would, however, oblige the government to a certain containment with regard to Catholics.

Less known religious minorities had an even more difficult time, not enjoying any legal recognition and often being considered close to the capitalist Western world (e.g. Salvation Army), or even to Nazism (Baptists – labelled “Free Evangelical Church” since the “Third Reich”). Without going into details at this point, it is safe to say summarily that they had to face government hostilities ranging from low-level harassment (less education opportunities, etc.) to stiff persecution (imprisonment).

After the *Wende*: creations, splittings, fadings, and institutional rearrangements

With German unification in 1990, the churches’ public role and their social perception changed strongly (Thériault 2004). The participation of the main churches in public debates, or their involvement in the provision of social services, were often put forward when it came to characterise the ethical concerns of the new federal state administrations. After the fall of the wall, for instance, official meetings reuniting the persons working for the state security (*Staatssicherheit/Stasi*) and those who had been harmed by that institution were organised mostly by churches. Gajdukowa’s (2004) analysis of the meetings has shown that the Christian discourse has allowed not identifying any perpetrators or victims, since in a Christian sense – at least in a Lutheran sense, as the main Church in Eastern Germany – guilt is part of all human existence. The discourse offered by the church allowed all participants, who were by no means all religiously

¹⁴ *Caritas* was started in 1897 in Germany as an umbrella confederation of Roman Catholic relief, development and social service organisations which today operates worldwide and has become an indispensable partner for state actors in the provision of social care.

¹⁵ The *Jugendweihe* was introduced in 1955 as a compulsory socialist youth consecration, turning a formerly strictly secular event initiating teenagers into adulthood into a commitment to socialism, aimed at replacing the Christian confirmation.

¹⁶ This and the following quotes are taken from the verbatim transcription of the interview. They are all translated by myself.

committed, to overcome the conflicts at least partly. As the author writes, the church “offered during these discussion meetings an authoritative frame also for secular people to think about responsibility” (Gajdukowa 2004: 26). Representatives of the churches – Protestant, Roman Catholic and from the Free Churches – were chairing the debates at round tables. Their role was to remain neutral in creating the conditions for a discussion between the different social and political forces at the table. Although the churches were not defending a specific point of view at the table, they gained a huge amount of recognition through this involvement (Winter 2000: 19–20).

From yet another, less moral and more political-institutional, point of view, the Christian Churches seemed to benefit from the collapse of communism: pressure on them was removed, several Christian holy days were restored as state holidays, and numerous theologians took over leading positions in the new state structures (Vögele 1994). In the constitutions of the new federal states, the link between church and state was transformed into one of friendly collaboration, which meant the almost total adoption of the Western model.¹⁷ Today, both churches, plus some Orthodox ones, are bodies defined by public law (Aires 2004, Neumann 2001). The German constitution grants church-related organisations a privileged status to shape and implement welfare and social service provisions. As in West Germany, the principle of subsidiarity¹⁸ became the cornerstone of the welfare system (Thelen and Read 2007). This change meant that the whole social organisation around welfare provisions was put upside-down. While it was a top-down, centralised organisation during socialism, the post-unification principle called for the social forces at the lowest possible level to take over social services. The introduction of the subsidiarity principle, rooted in the Christian social doctrine¹⁹, clearly favoured the churches to take over social tasks. However, not only the main churches were put in a privileged position due to this principle, also smaller Christian churches and organisations offering social services suddenly enjoyed a far more valued stance in society.²⁰

These changes had an impact upon the relation of civil activists to the churches. When the wall was opened, numerous members of peace and environmental groups, who had used the church for their meetings and political mobilisation, abandoned any religious involvement. The more plausible form of involvement then was political, since the churches were no longer standing in opposition to the state, nor were they any longer the only places for civil and political activism. Those activists,

¹⁷ Von Mangoldt’s (1997) study of the new constitutions of the East German federal states shows that in Saxony the collaboration is most clearly affirmed: “Einerseits bleiben die Kirchen und Religionsgemeinschaften bei der Erfüllung ihrer Aufgabe vom Staate getrennt und sind nun den für alle geltenden Gesetzen unterworfen (...). Andererseits ist manches Zusammenwirken von Kirche und Staat bei der Erledigung gemeinsamer Aufgaben vorgesehen: beim Religionsunterricht (...). Der Freistaat geht damit auf die Kirche zu, um Gerechtigkeit nach den Verirrungen des atheistischen Staates wiederherzustellen und der bedeutenden Rolle Rechnung zu tragen, welche die Kirchen in der Friedlichen Revolution auch durch des Volkes Willen haben gewinnen können.” (Mangoldt 1997: 83). All the same, the distance to churches is clearer in the other federal states, most of all in Brandenburg.

¹⁸ In Germany, the *Subsidiaritätsprinzip* (subsidiarity principle) means “the distribution of public tasks on different juridical actors”, such as associations and other institutions (Pirson 1998: 70). As long as smaller, local organisations are able to provide certain services they should do so, while higher situated institutions only intervene when their competences or structures are not sufficient anymore. Since the Weimar Republic, the different associations providing such services are grouped in larger units, and called *Spitzenverbände*. In West Germany, they have played a dominant role since the 1970s in the realm of social help and have professionalised their organisational structures, increasingly resembling state-institutions. Parallel to these associations, “free” initiatives are also organised. Cf. also Offe 1996, Anheier 2001.

¹⁹ The philosophical background of the principle of subsidiarity as a social theory is to be found in Aquinas’ doctrine of the “bonum commune”, the common good; individuals and smaller communities should operate at the service of the common good and therefore receive ample powers. Also Jean Calvin referred to this idea in his social doctrine. Only in 1931, however, was the principle formulated in an explicit way in an encyclical letter of the Catholic Church (Pirson 1998: 70).

²⁰ Cf. also article 15 of the *Einigungsvertrag* (Unification Treaty), and §10 of the *Bundessozialhilfegesetz*, the federal law on social help.

who had a closer link to the church, split into an institutional part (as for instance the Catholics with *Caritas*, Protestants with the *Diakonie*²¹, ecological groups and fair-trade shops) and a rather underground wing (as for instance the anti-fascist and anti-militarist *Kirche von Unten*, an alternative place for political groups, punk concerts, open kitchen, debates etc. in East Berlin²²). It was, at the latest, when the Round Tables disappeared around 1993 that the new location of religion in East German society became clear. On the one hand, churches received a remarkable juridical and political recognition (and to a lesser extent financial support) from the state, on the other, they had no demographic justification: less than 25 per cent of the East German population belong to a religion at all. People expected from the churches to participate in public and political life but also to remain as independent as possible from state power. Now, the next step shall be to describe the way these political, social, economic, and cultural changes have affected the realm of offender rehabilitation.

Programmes of Offender Rehabilitation in Eastern Germany

In Eastern Germany, the question of the re-integration of ex-prisoners into society emerged anew after the *Wende*. During socialism, the state provided employment and housing for all released prisoners, as it did for all other citizens, for that matter. The notions of ‘crime’ and of ‘prisoner’ have also strongly changed since the fall of socialism: political crimes and prisoners have disappeared – at least in the sense as understood by the dissidents of the time²³ – while drug-related offences, for instance, have increased.

The *Wende* had – not only symbolically – a huge importance for prison-related civil activists: it was associated with the long awaited possibility to finally democratise the justice system.²⁴ As Förster writes, the *Wende* “opened the doors of the prisons, for the first time it also made imprisonment a little more transparent for the public, a taboo of the GDR was publicly discussed” (Förster 1996: 112).

Even more so inside prison, the *Wende* brought cutting-edge changes for those prisoners who remained confined. Generally, they obtained more rights, for instance in terms of contact to the outside, than they had during socialism. A former inmate, now in his early forties, whom I interviewed in September 2006 while he was attending an arts workshop organised by a secular rehabilitation programme in East Berlin, experienced this change personally. He told me that he had been imprisoned in spring of 1989 for murder and had received a sentence of more than 15 years. His sentence was reconsidered after the *Wende* and he came out ‘already’ in 2000 and found an apartment thanks to the housing programme of a secular rehabilitation programme, The *Freie Hilfe Berlin*, which I shall describe in more detail later. For years, he had been an alcoholic and attended a Christian rehabilitation programme already during socialism where he started being attracted by religious questions despite his strongly atheistic family background: his father “was in the Party”, as he worded it.

²¹ *Diakonie* refers to the organised Protestant social welfare provision that started in Germany in 1848. It has become today, one of the major organisations for social care in Germany. As for *Caritas*, its activity was reduced but not discontinued during the GDR.

²² For *Kirche von Unten* (Church from Below) cf. their website www.kvu-berlin.de (accessed in December 2008). More generally on opposition movements cf. Pollack 1994 and Neubert 2000.

²³ According to the SED’s official information there were no political prisoners in the GDR prisons. Cf. Rüdtenklau 1992.

²⁴ The prisons were almost emptied (by October 1990, the percentage of imprisoned persons was one third of its counterpart in the West) but within only a couple of months they were filled up again.

After the trial, he was very scared of going to prison, for the one he was to be held in had a terrible reputation as a place of violence and despair. But, as he expressed it, “then the *Wende* [came], and a lot of help-organisations entered.” The religious experience in prison also changed immensely: “before the *Wende*, the religious services always took place under surveillance, there were always officers, it was not as open as after the *Wende*. We always had the impression we were watched – it was also common to say: ‘You only go to the religious service in order to receive some kind of presents.’ (...) Actually, I had mentally put an end [to my life] when I was imprisoned: ‘Either I survive the time or not.’ If the *Wende* hadn’t happened, I would have remained in [prison X] for fifteen years: nobody knows if I would have survived that time.” For him, the *Wende* clearly had saved his life.

To open prisons to the public also entailed that the public would now start dealing with the problems linked to imprisonment. However, the population had to face massive unemployment and depopulation so that the conditions for a positive attitude towards prisoners and their release were rather precarious, which was an additional difficulty for social workers in this realm (Förster 1996). As it happened around many social problems that emerged after Unification, the East German population complained about the insufficient structural answers of the west to the major economic and social crises they were experiencing. As a reaction, socially active citizens started to locally develop “a type of action and of decision-making that was specifically Eastern German” around 1994/1995, according to Izeki (1999: 98). On the remaining pages I shall propose a panorama of the specific configurations that emerged in the realm of offender rehabilitation. My claim is that the 1990s were crucial years during which many new and specific patterns developed which allowed actors and institutions to refer to the *Wende* not only as a moment of collapse but also of creation and origin.

The field of offender rehabilitation was opened to the semi-private realm according to the principle of subsidiarity, leading to a situation of competition among the various associations. If they fulfil certain criteria given by a legal frame (such as no discrimination on the basis of religious belonging, targeting a precise, legally defined category of persons, etc.) and collaborate with the state administration (economic and political transparency, etc.), they receive public funding and recognition (cf. Anheier, Priller and Zimmer 2000). In this realm, there are now state institutions, secular non-governmental associations, but also church-related associations and institutions. Some were created anew after the *Wende* either by politically active East German citizens (partly around the initiatives of the Round Tables) or by immigrated West-German actors; others are part of expanded West-German institutions (e. g. *Universal Stiftung*, the Protestant social welfare organisations – *Stadtmission*). Both types of programmes – independently initiated or transferred – can be either secular or religious.

Among the numerous programmes providing help in the field of offender rehabilitation in Germany, eight are in Berlin and ten in Brandenburg.²⁵ Slightly more than a fourth of these programmes were initiated and are carried out by religious organisations. All religious institutions

²⁵ According to the *Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft für Straffälligenhilfe e.V.* (bag), the federal umbrella agency for offender rehabilitation, there are more than 300 organisations active in this realm in the whole of Germany. About one fourth of them are in Eastern Germany. Of those located in Eastern Germany, again, one out of four has some religious orientation. To make a comparison, this rate is much higher in Bavaria, while it is lower in Baden-Württemberg. I here also refer to the following sources: my own research data collected among others at a *Caritas* meeting on the federal level, the documents produced by the *Freie Hilfe Berlin e.V.* and *socialnet* website, <http://socialnet.de/> (accessed in December 2008).

in this area are Christian-oriented.²⁶ Protestant, Catholic, and other Christian institutions active in the realm of rehabilitation today receive public recognition and funding. As a consequence of the new state-church link and the new organisation of the welfare system following the principle of subsidiarity, established religions are today considered as important partners by state administrations when it comes to rehabilitating ex-convicts (Hildemann 2004). For example, in prison newspapers, brochures, and on internet sites on offender rehabilitation (issued by state institutions, secular and religious non-governmental organisations²⁷) usually Christian (Protestant and Catholic) support centres (*Caritas*, *Diakonie*, *Stadtmission*, *Schwarzes Kreuz*, etc.) are systematically mentioned, while one very rarely finds institutions led by other religious communities.²⁸

My argument is that the relation the actors active in these programmes have to the aftermath of the *Wende* is a key to understanding their specifically East German self-perception and the moral orientation of their current practices. Different denominations can share a common reference to a specific East German identity, which in turn is characterised by a clear containment of religious elements. I shall distinguish different providers of social help in the realm of offender rehabilitation according to their religious origin, be it Protestant, Roman Catholic, or 'Free Evangelical'. I shall concentrate on how they present themselves in respect to the socialist past and compare them, in the end, with institutions having a secular orientation. The aim of this comparison shall be to identify a certain closeness of the secular support to ex-offenders – its self-understanding – to some East German denominational actors. This closeness, I argue, comes from its shared experience of social change.

Protestant Actors Supporting Ex-Offenders

In summer 2006, I first contacted the head of the *Landesverband für Straffälligen- und Bewährungshilfe Sachsen-Anhalt*²⁹, a county-wide network of support associations for offender rehabilitation.³⁰ When I asked her about the role of religion in the realm of offender rehabilitation she answered: "We are against it because we want people to take on their own responsibility." In a second moment, however she advised me to call a pastor who had been strongly involved "at the time" and who would be able to answer my questions. She assured me that she would first contact him in order to "prepare my meeting." When I met him the pastor was retired, but at the time he had indeed played a leading role in an ecumenical working group created in 1990 for the Magdeburg prison, including socially active citizens, prison wardens, and church people. The pastor was indeed very friendly and invited me to join him for the *vernissage* of a photo exhibition in the Magdeburg prison: after the ceremony, he would introduce me to other persons so we could have a talk. I realised only months later that they actually wanted to create the right conditions to talk about their story and the role of religion. As Malinowski (1936) writes, the social context in

²⁶ I count here those associations and programmes active exclusively in the field of ex-offender rehabilitation.

²⁷ The *Ratgeber für Inhaftierte, Haftentlassene und deren Angehörige* (guide for inmates, former inmates, and their families) currently published by the *Arbeiterwohlfahrt Kreisverband Chemnitz und Umgebung* (Workers Welfare Association for Chemnitz and Surroundings) advertises, for instance, *Missionarinnen der Nächstenliebe* (missionaries of charity) and *Caritas*.

²⁸ The website http://www.bag-straffaelligenhilfe.de/bereich3_2.htm names the German central Muslim council (accessed in December 2008).

²⁹ Cf. <http://www.lvsb.homepage.t-online.de/>

³⁰ Today, this network includes more than 15 non-governmental associations and also collaborates strongly with state institutions. Its contribution to public debates in the region counts heavily.

which a myth is narrated is at least as important as the exact story. The story of the emergence of the Magdeburg social support programme for offenders could not be told by only one of the persons involved – the different perspectives had to be re-collected (Assmann 2000: 22). As a result, I sat down around a table in Magdeburg with the Protestant pastor, a former prison warden of the Magdeburg prison, and social workers of today's local support centre for released prisoners. The meeting itself was a sort of ritual of remembrance to re-enact a collective memory. The pastor was invited by the others to tell the story of the formation of the local association of support to ex-inmates. He remembered:

“Shortly before unification, the Magdeburg local association for offender rehabilitation was founded and shortly afterwards the regional association (...). The church, because it was not integrated into the socialist State, was the first interlocutor of the non-governmental initiatives. When the local association was created, there were only church people: from the Protestant social welfare network, *Caritas* (...). Those active in the initiatives coming from the West immediately addressed the church first. So the two associations were composed by church people. This, however, changed immediately because we thought the church should not remain in this position, they are free (...) the church can only be a midwife, so that autonomous associations and initiatives can develop (...) and so the local association changed very quickly. Church-related collaborators joined other initiatives, *Caritas*, the Protestant social welfare organisation.”

Church actors considered themselves as ‘midwives’ who would retreat once the new-born was there. During this discussion, the democratic commitment of the East German religious actors became very clear. The pastor underlined, for instance, that for him the first article of the constitution, “Human dignity is inviolable”, is a fundamental value that can be justified theologically. According to him, and this is the basis of his motivation to care for prisoners, “each person deserves to be loved, even if he is the worst dog that has to be incarcerated for life. But – somewhere, somehow – every person has worth. And this is crucial for me, the value that took on its concrete character through God becoming a person.”

By putting forward such values as comprehension, forgiveness, and humanity, he showed his universal concern for the good of society as a whole. According to the pastor, the church's task is to contribute to the building of a “free society with a democratic state, where the values we find important are preserved”. A non-denominational social worker at the table enthusiastically reacted to this remark: “When I hear such a statement, I feel so close to church!”

Here, the pastor and even more the reaction of the social worker exemplify the wide-spread East German understanding of the place and role of church in society: it has to be morally encompassing but independent and keep a critical distance to the state in order to allow the democratic functioning of society. The more discrete and modest religion is in public the better it seems to be accepted by East Germans. A free civil society and a healthy democracy were created and had their origin in the aftermath of the *Wende*. Religious actors disappeared, retreated into denominational activities, or transformed into secular ones to build up new, ‘free’ institutions.

According to Mircea Eliade, a myth

“narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the ‘beginnings’. In other words myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality – an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an

institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a ‘creation’; it relates how something was produced, began *to be* (...). The actors in myths are Supernatural Beings. They are known primarily by what they did in the transcendent times of the ‘beginnings’. Hence myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness (or simply the ‘supernaturalness’) of their works.” (Eliade 1963: 5–6)

In the pastor’s narrative of the aftermath of the *Wende* the most active persons were those who did not escape to the West and who engaged in the various political and social groups concerned with the construction of a democratic civil and secular society.

As René Girard (1990: 344–345) writes, myths allow people to think or reflect upon a traumatic experience, such as, I argue, the brutally quick social change brought about when socialism ended. Such a change caused for many to lose their job, their apartment, their cultural and political references, but some were able to re-invent themselves. They experienced the aftermath of the *Wende* as a moment of social effervescence that bound people together and endowed them with a collective identity. Although the bonds, which were then created between people, remain during the 1990s, religion ceased to be the glue it used to be for them after the *Wende*. Today, these East Germans continue emphasising their being independent from any religion. As Malinowski expressed it, myths also always have dogmatic consequences, indicating what is good and what is bad. The social worker sitting at the table in Magdeburg insisted that she “never considered it worth knowing” what the religious belonging or belief of others is: “I am a child of the GDR (...) I myself decide about my relation to the church (...) religious belonging has no importance for my work (...) It is ok, that church people have stepped out of our organisation.”³¹

As a consequence, religion has a peculiar place in Eastern Germany; at the level of grass-roots action it has as such disappeared, while it was strongly present and active just around the *Wende*. All the important figures who were imprisoned during GDR times for political reasons, among whom one could also find many theologians or persons active in church-related oppositional groups, and who became very active in the fight against imprisonment around the time of the *Wende*, seem not to take part at all in current debates on prisons.³² Instead, new, ‘free’ – that is – non-governmental associations were ‘born’ and they transmit humanitarian messages on their own.

Church structures were, in turn, relocated closer to the state, thereby becoming politically less independent. A good example in this regard is the Berlin Protestant social welfare centre – *Berliner Stadtmission* – located close to the main railway station in the area where the wall used to separate city quarters Mitte and Moabit, only half a kilometre from one of the biggest prisons in West-Berlin. In 2001, a programme called *Drinnen und Draußen* (inside and outside) was initiated at the centre. It offers support to inmates who are close to their release (having less than two years left) and prepares the exit by finding housing, discussing training possibilities, mediating in case of conflicts with the partner, etc. The ex-inmates then receive support for a while also outside prison. No specific programme addresses the East German ex-inmates, about 200 of their so-called ‘clients’ per year, nor has the *Wende* any importance in the self-understanding of this programme. I met different ex-convicts when participating in the activities of this programme, but none was East German, nor were most of the employees of the programme. At the celebration of the launching of

³¹ Interestingly, the only exception for her is when she has to deal with Muslims, as she said: “I know of course, when it comes to Muslims, it plays no minor role anymore, when we need to solve basic problems, or problems related to the marriage etc. religion cannot be left out, I am absolutely aware of that.”

³² Cf. for instance the activities of the Robert-Havemann Society in Berlin: <http://www.havemann-gesellschaft.de> (accessed in December 2008).

the programme in a Berlin prison in October 2006, I could observe how close the programme was to state institutions. The ministers and wardens present all expressed their gratitude for the existence of the programme and the trust they put in it.

Support from the Catholic Side: *Caritas*

The main actor in the field of offender rehabilitation related to the Catholic Church is *Caritas*. In Eastern Germany after the collapse of socialism, *Caritas* has “emerged in a completely different way” as it is in West Germany, as the *Caritas* employee mentioned earlier expressed it: “*Caritas* simply has emerged here out of the parishes”. He defines himself as a religious person, although his Christian identity is more important for him than the Catholic one, in particular since he married a protestant woman. “After the *Wende*”, he narrated, “the association *Caritas* came, the one that already existed in the West: the structure came from the West but many things, the understanding of our work or of the ‘provision of services’ as they [the westerners] say, to understand how I do what I do, this is still strongly rooted in the East”. In this way he expresses that East German Catholics appropriated western structures.

The different employees of the *Caritas* offender rehabilitation programme in Eastern Germany know each other closely and meet on a regular basis. One of the most important centres is located in the town of Frankfurt/Oder in Brandenburg. Most of the social workers involved in the programmes organised by this office got to know each other during their studies in the Catholic School for social work which was founded in Berlin right after the wall came down.³³ Here, too, the *Caritas* worker narrated his story by giving the *Wendezeit* a mythic importance:

“Then after the *Wende* I had the possibility – I was always interested in it but with no A-level diploma, since I had not taken part in the socialist youth consecration ritual – (...) to attend a Catholic high school. It was again about questioning values – those I find important – and an enlargement of my point of view. Today I still rely on what I experienced there (...). After the *Wende*, in the first semester, the people all used the chance again – we were questioning what the professors from the West presented not only as self-evident in terms of knowledge but also in terms of values. We were all standing in our lives and we had all experienced the *Wende* in such a conscious way that we were questioning a lot of things. It really was a time of uprising, it was really great we tried so hard to contribute to shaping our high school. I was just talking about that recently, we still use the contacts and the experience of the time.”

For these social workers, the high school remains a ‘point of identification’, they realise that they were deeply influenced by ‘that experience’. In 2006, the office celebrated its 10th anniversary by organising a gathering in the centre, a multi-level building with offices, a chapel, a nursery, and a large church. Prison wardens, representatives of the Protestant church and local political authorities (mayors) were invited, and a local theatre company performed a play related to imprisonment. All authorities spoke and praised the *Caritas*’ work in the area: the presence of this *Caritas* institution, so a mayor said, is “a sign that Frankfurt’s prisons are humane”. On various occasions – during this celebration but also when I met the collaborators in other contexts – the word humanity and Christianity were used in an interchangeable way. On the walls posters related to the history of the office by showing continuity from the 1970s, when the first *Caritas* help for released prisoners in

³³ Cf. <http://www.khsb-berlin.de> (accessed in December 2008).

Frankfurt was created, on to today. Until the end of the GDR, the few active persons kept constant contact with inmates and with priests who were allowed to visit them. After 1989, however, the activities listed on the posters multiplied visibly: housing programmes, schooling of volunteers, debts-mediations, presentations in schools, photo exhibitions, etc. In 1990, they were part of the commission of the Ministry of Justice charged with re-organising the prison system. In 1996, an office (with three employees) assisting released persons with housing programmes was opened and is expanding in the Brandenburg region. Interestingly, through this self-presentation the office showed at the same time that it inscribed its activities in continuity with the GDR times, and that it was re-created in 1996. Continuity was often stressed between the socialist past and today to show their experience and justify their current competences. In May 2007, I attended the opening of a photo exhibition in the *Marienkirche* in Frankfurt. With the support of *Caritas*, an artist worked with inmates for months and their pictures were now exhibited in the church. Mayors and ministers were present and while the latter praised the collaboration with churches when it comes to offender rehabilitation, the former mentioned the particular pre-disposition East Germans have with regard to walls. The aim of exhibiting photographs prisoners took in prison was, according to him, to show publicly what happens “behind the walls. We of the GDR”, he continued, “we all have wall-experience and know how important that is”. His “we” indicates the existence of a collective identification as East Germans and a collective wish to democratise the justice system, a wish that seems to be as strongly felt still, as it was the case around the *Wende*.

For Catholics active in *Caritas*, the *Wendezeit* seems to have been less of a traumatic experience rather than a re-invigorating one. After unification, their religious community were strengthened and continued their activities while keeping a certain political scepticism. During the years at the Berlin high school, the social workers experienced a certain social effervescence, to put it in Durkheimian terms, to which they refer in their work today.

The “Free Evangelical” Churches’ Offer

An important trans-confessional Christian association working in the field of offender rehabilitation is the *Schwarzes Kreuz* – the Black Cross. It was founded in Germany in 1925, but was discontinued in the GDR.³⁴ Only after the *Wende*, has it been restored in the East – in Brandenburg, Saxony, and Berlin – following the West-German structure. In its self-presentation, the time of the *Wende* appears not as a moment of creation, but of liberation, of the possibility to join, ideologically and organisationally, the West. Its volunteers are particularly active in prisons and only to a limited extent outside of them. It is basically an association guided by committed Christians – mostly but not only Baptists or Charismatics – that aims at linking together volunteers and social workers. It trains volunteers and organises to help inmates prepare for their release. It supports them in finding an apartment, possibly employment, etc. At the public presentations (real or virtual) appealing to new volunteers, its Christian orientation becomes very clear: Bible verses are quoted in every conversation, Christian prayers and songs encouraged at every meeting³⁵, etc. Being a very large but loose network for the moment in Eastern Germany – there are single

³⁴ See <http://www.schwarzes-kreuz.de> (accessed in December 2008).

³⁵ Cf. their monthly newsletter *News*.

volunteers of the network spread over a wide territorial area but they are quite dispersed – its influence remains modest.

Ex-inmates can find support also in other Christian institutions that are not directly concerned with offender rehabilitation but related problems such as family conflicts, drug-addictions, etc. In that sense, we can mention some examples located in East Berlin: the *Evangelische Beratungsstellen*, helpdesks for persons in distress or life-crisis, the *Salvation Army*, where they can find clothes and food for free, and *Ichthys*, a centre for the rehabilitation of alcohol addicted persons founded in 1992/3 by a couple of Baptists coming from West Germany.

Only for the *Evangelische Beratungsstellen* that opened in East Berlin in 1991 the *Wende* is a founding event. As a matter of fact, their legitimacy was given since the beginning by the Ministry for Family of the transition government, which requested from evangelical free churches to create such helpdesks. In the opening speech of the Pankow (East Berlin) desk³⁶ in 1992, the district mayor welcomed the initiative warmly and assured the district's will to "collaborate as a trustful partner". Today some of the about 30 help desks in the town of Berlin have been taken over by the Protestant church.

The *Salvation Army* and *Ichthys* present themselves as Christian in an ostentatious way and they describe their work as the necessary contribution to the re-evangelisation of the East, which often frightens potential East German 'clients'.³⁷

Secular Help Organisations

The secular institutions working directly in the realm of offender rehabilitation are more numerous in Eastern Germany. Some were created in West-Berlin and are now present in the whole city and to some extent in Brandenburg, such as the *Universal-Stiftung* which is mainly concerned with professional training. It is a huge foundation created by the city of Berlin in 1957 on the initiative of Helmut Ziegner, a politically and socially committed actor, and today employs about 220 persons. In 1996 it expanded its programmes to the East where it had to deal with sceptical attitudes on both sides, as the responsible person for the East German programmes asserted during our conversation in his office. For this foundation, the *Wende* basically offered the possibility to enter the East, where no fundamentally new rehabilitation formula was invented.

To find the opposite, that is, a foundation that invented itself as a product of the *Wende*, we need to look at the most active and known association in East Berlin (its posters and advertisements cannot be overlooked by prison visitors in the waiting areas or in prison-related magazines, etc.): the *Freie Hilfe Berlin e.V.* (FHB hereafter).

This association offers a clear territorial and historical reference to Eastern Germany. As a matter of fact, not only is it located in East Berlin, it also originated as a product of the *Wende*-initiatives. It was created in the early 1990s specifically for persons who, having grown up in the GDR and coming out of prison, did not feel at ease going to institutions that they considered to be

³⁶ Cf. *Festschrift Geschichte und Geschichten. 1991-2001. 10 Jahre Beratung und Lebenshilfe e. V.* 2001.

³⁷ Two ex-inmates – two East German men in their 40s – I met were first released from prison into that institution. They told me that only a few days later, they escaped because they could not stand the insistence on Christian morality put forward all day long by the leader of the institution. The leader would exercise his authority on the new-comers in order to test to what extent they were ready to abandon their own – according to him necessarily wrong – attitude and take over without questioning it the ideas of the Christian centre. It seems that for him, personal responsibility and independence were not primordial values.

‘western’³⁸. In the 1990s, the FHB quickly developed into one of the main associations in Berlin offering a wide spectrum of rehabilitation programmes to convicts and former inmates. It organises different rehabilitation programmes, focusing on working, computing, arts, housing, and drug rehabilitation. Some are specifically for migrants, others for women or youth, etc. They are known by prisoners and their families through the large advertisement they make.

A citation out of the brochure the FHB edited for their 10th anniversary illustrates this affirmation:

“The birth of the FREE HELP BERLIN association happened in the middle of the 1990s, in the often quoted time of the *Wende*. At different moments activists met at round tables, in forums, in expert meetings, in discussions and lobbied for the organisation of a new type of help and support for offender rehabilitation that would take experience into account. In this mixture of feelings and perspectives it was not easy to create something new, which was impossible earlier, and to link it into strong existing structures which were given for granted, something which would reflect a meaningful and realisable conception of an association of support for offender rehabilitation that would correspond to the needs (...). In this context, citizens of the districts of Pankow and Prenzlauer Berg who were more or less accidentally active met around the common idea of founding a non-governmental organisation supporting the rehabilitation of criminals. In a metaphorical sense, this is how the spermatozoon joined the ovule, and a fertilized germ cell could develop.”³⁹

From this quote, we can easily draw a connection to the metaphor of the ‘midwife’ mentioned by the Magdeburg pastor earlier. Both, this secular memory and the Protestant one use creation metaphors when referring to the *Wende*. The collaborators of the FHB actively participate in public debates today, animated by the spirit of the ‘Round Tables’, that is, with the aim of improving the level of political participation in civil society⁴⁰. During my year of observation at the rehabilitation programme of the FHB, I could recognise in the practices what the social worker in Magdeburg mentioned earlier about religion as “not worth knowing”. The only time a pastor was called was for the burial of one rehabilitant who had passed away. The social workers felt that the presence of a pastor at the funeral was necessary for them to express their human concern, although the client never had any contact to this pastor nor to any church. This idea of human dignity was similar to that articulated by the Magdeburg pastor.

In spite of the programme’s clear secular and pragmatic orientation, Christmas and Easter were celebrated as special days in the house: a good meal was prepared and offered with presents to everybody. However, no explicit reference was made to what the Christian reason or message of these festivities are.

Conclusion

In this text I tried to disentangle how different notions of the secular and of the religious have emerged as a result of historical, social and institutional transformations and how they are present in today organisational acting. The institutional strengthening of the churches after socialism and,

³⁸ Cf. *Freie Hilfe Berlin* 2000. Westerners agree on this division of the addressees. When talking to a Western representative of the Protestant Church one day in Berlin, I told him that I was following a reintegration programme of the FHB. He then commented that I probably worked with skinheads – as in his opinion East German inmates were primarily nazi-skinheads.

³⁹ *10 Jahre Freie Straffälligenhilfe in Berlin*. Op. cit, p. 4.

⁴⁰ For instance at the debates in the café of the newspaper *Die Tageszeitung* in Berlin, on November 13, 2007, the topic was *Das Gefängnis als Ort der Gewalt? (The Prison as a Place of Violence?)*.

in parallel, the withdrawal of the state from social functions meant a complete re-orientation of all actors involved in social help. In the case of post-socialist Eastern Germany, we need to distinguish not only secular from religious but also the relation to the time of social change, called *Wende*, and in particular to its aftermath. The events of those years laid the foundations of what is today referred to as specifically East German. Such distinctions made it possible to get closer to the actual complexity of the secular-religious realm of social help in today's Eastern Germany.

The rehabilitation of ex-offenders has become an important new social problem after the collapse of socialism. Secular and religious institutions started to become active in this realm in the 1990s and propose a similar kind of support. Their self-understanding, however, can vary considerably according to their genealogy or living memory. The aftermath of the *Wende* was for some a moment of 'effervescence' that formed the values guiding their action. These values – humanity and human dignity, for instance – can hence guide the actions of both secular and religious actors. It is the relation to such founding events, that is, events that can constitute myths, that determines the closeness or not of the secular and the religious sphere. Using the memory of the collective experience made during the *Wendezeit* has allowed those East Germans active in the reconstruction of the third sector to give their practices a meaning and a moral orientation that is distinctive and constructive.

To sum up, while religious institutions penetrated into the East with strong organisational means coming from the West, civil activists contributed immensely to shaping the new realms of social help from below, with a good knowledge of the needs of their addressees. While the numbers in religious affiliations only show a decrease, conceiving what happened to religion in terms of transformation – maybe mythical transformation – allows for more nuances. As the short analysis of the emergence of offender rehabilitation programmes has shown, religious and secular developments after the collapse of socialism have been very different.

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