1 Introducing Socialism and Secularism as Two Cultures

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

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

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

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

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

[2] Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," in *Marx: Early Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 57.
[3] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003); Michael Warner, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
[4] Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex and Secularism* (Princeton University Press, 2018), 13–15.
[5] Elizabeth S. Hurd, "The Political Authority of Secularism in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations*, 10/2 (2004): 247.
[6] Marian Burchardt, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr and Matthias Middell (eds.), *Multiple Secularities Beyond the West: Religion and Modernity in the Global Age* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015); Linell

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Culture of Secularism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I will add one further specification to my definition of the term culture. It differs from that of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who viewed culture as comprising "webs of significance" akin to language, which are utilized by a human community to make meaning.[17] Instead, I approach the cultures of socialism and secularism as self-organizing and self-referential social systems, comprising individuals, associations and practices. According to German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, the essence of a social system is that it is iterative and autopoietic, which means that it produces and reproduces itself through the continual circulation of members, information and activities, all of which are recognized by the system as component parts.[18] In the case of socialism, such parts are the party and labor organizations, electoral campaigns, as well as the ideas discussed in meetings and in the press. Socialist culture incorporated also associations, songs and rituals, in what American historian Vernon Lidtke called the "alternative culture" in his eponymous book of 1985.[19] The notion that secularism might be also grasped as a *culture* in its own right, which I develop in this book, was prompted by the work of cultural studies scholar Horst Groschopp, whose *Dissidenten* (1997) first showed that secularism was a philosophically and politically coherent project reproduced in an extensive network of intellectuals and associations in imperial Germany.[20] Thus, like the socialist movement, secularism, too, was not merely a discourse, but comprised self-organizing networks and associations that engaged in a high degree

[16] Charles Percy Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 9.
[17] Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30 (at 5).
[18] Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz Jr. and Dirk Baecker (Stanford University Press, 1995), 32–41.
[19] Vernon L. Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
[20] Horst Groschopp, *Dissidenten: Freidenkerei und Kultur in Deutschland* (Berlin: J. H. W. Dietz, 1997).

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

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

What was Red Secularism?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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