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Dirk Schuster

The rise and fall of the ‘Marxist sociology of religion’ in the GDR

Introduction

This paper sketches out the central principles of communicative constructivism, focusing on the role of experts in modern societies. It shows to what extent researchers as experts on knowledge about religion were dependent on the goodwill of the political elite in the GDR. The author makes clear that discrepancies between the interests of scientists and those of their political patrons existed almost from the very beginning. Their original research program entailed empirical studies which were supposed to be used for propaganda as well as to prove the thesis that religion would automatically die out in a socialist society. Yet, it seemed as though the political leadership was unwilling to face the results of surveys measuring the religiosity of the population. A retreat to theoretical work and the repetition of dogmatic paroles was demanded instead. Eventually, scientists working within the Marxist Sociology of Religion lost their function and authorization to generate and spread knowledge. This example explains a lot about the ambiguous attitude of the socialist state towards science – it demonstrates its ideologization of science as an infallible source of truth, but also its selectivity in appraising scientific work.

1 Theoretical background of knowledge construction

Communicative constructivism, which arose from constructivism a few years ago, determines the function of communication in a general sense, not only as the “transmission (of information), but particularly [as] mediation (of social identity and social order).”¹ If one examines this mediation of knowledge in the context of modern societies shaped by labor division, one can ascertain,

¹ Jo Reichertz: “Grundzüge des kommunikativen Konstruktivismus,” in *Kommunikativer Konstruktivismus. Theoretische und empirische Arbeiten zu einem neuen wissenssoziologischen Ansatz*, eds. Reiner Keller, Hubert Knoblauch, and Jo Reichertz (Wiesbaden: Springer Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2013), 50.

along with Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, that the expert is responsible for spreading extraordinary and specialist knowledge in these modern societies precisely due to the existing division of labor. It is crucial that a society recognize and request the role of experts when specialist knowledge is required.² If religious support is needed due to a bereavement in the personal sphere, one usually calls a vicar and not a carpenter, because only the vicar is a specialist in religious support and only a vicar is recognized by society as such.

Societal reality is constructed through the communication of a society itself. This reality establishes, among other things, power and inequality and also offers legitimation for existing structures.³ Legitimation thus not only ‘explains’ values,⁴ but also puts things in order by ‘explaining’ what the individual things actually are. The explanatory and defining function results in power through communication. In connection with this theoretical approach by Berger and Luckmann, it is possible to determine that knowledge is the basis for the legitimation of values,⁵ which will include power in what follows.

Knowledge is hereby not to be understood as the ultimate and irrevocable truth of things. Truth or reality is initially the result of a subjective construction, which only becomes knowledge through reasoning (usually through empirical experiments and evidence)⁶ and the ensuing recognition by others, which ultimately makes it the truth.⁷ Knowledge and therefore truth are accordingly subjected to a continuous negotiation process revolving around societal acceptance in order to be recognized as truthful in the first place. Until a few centuries ago, it

2 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2013 [1969]), 82. Knowledge will be understood in these pages as “the common property of validated truths about reality” through societal objectification, in agreement with Berger/Luckmann. This, moreover, (often) results in social sanctioning in a variety of forms, if an individual denies this common property of truths. Berger and Luckmann, *Gesellschaftliche Konstruktion*, 70.

3 Reichertz, *Grundzüge*, 51.

4 Berger and Luckmann use the simple explanation that legitimation explains why certain actions should be carried out and others not. Berger and Luckmann, *Gesellschaftliche Konstruktion*, 100.

5 Berger and Luckmann, *Gesellschaftliche Konstruktion*, 100.

6 This means, in the simplest case, testing (via empirical experiment) what shall become truth in daily routines, which would make the experiment functional in this way. Hitting a nail with a hammer produces the knowledge that a nail can be practically applied to a surface with a hammer.

7 See Ernst von Glasersfeld, “Steps in the construction of ‘others’ and ‘reality,’” in *Power, Autonomy, Utopias. New Approaches toward Complex Systems*, ed. Robert Trappl (London: Perseus Publishing, 1986), 107–16. Also, Ernst von Glasersfeld, “Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit und des Begriffs der Objektivität,” in *Einführung in den Konstruktivismus* (München: Piper, 2015), 9–39.

was regarded as a blatantly false teaching that humans were the result of a natural evolutionary process and that the earth revolves around the sun as a sphere. Only through the recognition by a societal majority as a result of persuasion with the help of evidence is such knowledge able to grow into an ultimate truth, which, however, can be relativized at any time in light of newer findings.

In modern societies, an expert is responsible for generating such knowledge, which creates a new truth through evidence. Only when the provided evidence, and therefore the results, are generally recognized does anything become the ultimate truth. Such recognition can commonly take place in one of two ways: Either the arguments prevail throughout society due to their strong validity, or else they are formulated in the interests of a ruler by a representative, whereupon the ruler supports the person or findings.⁸ For Jo Reichertz, therefore, results generated by scientists, the 'knowledge about knowledge' (or knowledge of a second order), are the preferred constructions of reality. According to him, scientists are bound to reason as well as to truth, and can offer statements about reality or are able to relativize contemporary realities through various different (recognized) methods.⁹

In this short theoretical overview, it becomes clear that science (based on an empirical foundation) is ascribed outstanding relevance in modern society due to its association with truthful statements about reality. In my opinion, these preliminary theoretical considerations regarding truth and science are useful for analyzing the examination of religion by representatives of the 'Marxist Sociology of Religion.' Marxist Sociology of Religion is hereby to be seen as part of a system, Scientific Atheism, within the sphere of Soviet influence, which examined the future role of religion in socialism.

The area of conflict between religion and science has been discussed widely and will thus not be presented at this point.¹⁰ In general, one can say – as Kehrer pointed out – that science and religion come in conflict with one another when they each make contradictory statements about a particular topic. When cultural or social sciences make statements about religions without claiming to examine or be able to examine decidedly religious statements regarding their validity,

⁸ Reichertz, *Grundzüge*, 64. The term 'ruler' is not necessarily understood as meaning only a 'political leader.'

⁹ Reichertz, *Grundzüge*, 64. The issue of the 'correct' truth, to which scientists should feel bound, remains unanswered in Reichertz' argumentation. Again, this is a construction.

¹⁰ For example, Ian G. Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion: Enemies, Strangers, or Partners?* (New York: Harper Collins 2000).

there is usually no conflict.¹¹ Scientific Atheism of the Marxist orientation is an exception in this context. This humanities- and social science-oriented discipline claimed to be able to prove the superiority of science over religion through reference to scientific findings and thus deduced the necessary dominance of scientific knowledge in all areas of societal life.¹² Representatives of ‘Scientific’ or ‘Marxist Atheism’ thus influenced the domain of religion by issuing statements based on Marxist-Leninist ideology concerning the ‘meaning of human life.’¹³ Scientific Atheism defined itself as an integral part of Marxism-Leninism,¹⁴ which resulted in science taking on the character of an ideology itself and thus stepping into direct competition with religion.¹⁵

In the Soviet sphere, representatives of Scientific Atheism profited from existing power structures in two ways: First, they followed the Marxist-Leninist dogma and were therefore under the protection of the respective ruling party. Second, they profited from the state-controlled public communication channels, as is characteristic for totalitarian systems. In this specific case, this means that the recognition of an individual’s personal truth could not follow the usual negotiation process involving evidence or argumentation. Whereas representatives of Scientific Atheism were able to spread their denial of religion in (widely circulated) books, magazines, radio and TV broadcasts or even through the education system,¹⁶ representatives of religion did not have many of these possibilities. The assessment of religion was one-sided in the public sphere, and was dominated by representatives of Marxism-Leninism.

The following will therefore not focus on a detailed analysis of Scientific Atheism during Soviet times. Rather, I will present how the acknowledgement or denial of ‘truth’ directly depends on the interests of political authorities, using the example of Marxist Sociology of Religion as part of the system of Scientific Atheism.

11 Günter Kehrer: “Atheismus, Religion und Wissenschaft – Ein Problemfeld zu klärender Verhältnisse,” *Erwägen Wissen Ethik* 25, no. 1, (2014): 5.

12 Kehrer establishes this generally for organized atheism. Kehrer, “Atheismus,” 7.

13 Thomas Schmidt-Lux, *Wissenschaft als Religion: Szientismus im ostdeutschen Säkularisierungsprozess* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2008), 121.

14 The mistake should not be made at this point of ascribing Scientific Atheism too much importance in Marxist-Leninist ideology. This error, however, is made on multiple occasions by Alfred Hoffmann concerning the GDR, “*Mit Gott einfach fertig: Untersuchungen zu Theorie und Praxis des Atheismus im Marxismus-Leninismus der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (Leipzig: Benno-Verlag, 2000).

15 Schmidt-Lux, *Wissenschaft*, 122–4.

16 For a more detailed example from the GDR, see Schmidt-Lux, *Wissenschaft*, 209–87.

The idea of representing the 'truth' was based on the above-mentioned ideologization of science as the only source of 'correct' knowledge. I will concentrate on the Marxist Sociology of Religion in the GDR up to 1970, after which it came to decisive changes concerning science, which were furthered by the change of leadership from Walter Ulbricht to Erich Honecker in May 1971. The SED determined at their 8th party conference in the summer of 1971 that the humanities should follow an (even) stronger political guidance as well as a stronger focus on theoretical (instead of empirical) research in their activities.¹⁷ As a consequence of the political re-orientation following the change in leadership, many of the research programs initiated since the 1960s, among them Scientific Atheism, fell victim to the Honecker's social policy.¹⁸

Accounting for the Marxist Sociology of Religion in the GDR, as Scientific Atheism describes itself until the end of the 1960s due to its specific objectives, constitutes a desideratum even today.¹⁹ The historical accounting for this scientific discipline will explicitly not be pursued here. Rather, this study will look at how the construction of 'truth' in a totalitarian system had to serve the legitimation of political power and how science could be stripped of its primacy in generating 'truth'.

2 On the historical starting point of scientific atheism in the GDR

The division of Germany into four occupation zones initially put churches, as well as representatives of the occupational forces, in a situation which needed to be re-negotiated concerning how the other should be treated. It should be noted that there were hardly any conflicts between churches, especially the Protestant regional churches, and the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (SMAD) in the first few months – a situation which also applies to the other oc-

¹⁷ Kurt Hager, *Die entwickelte sozialistische Gesellschaft. Aufgaben der Gesellschaftswissenschaften nach dem VIII. Parteitag der SED. Referat auf der Tagung der Gesellschaftswissenschaftler am 14. Oktober 1971 in Berlin*, (Berlin [East]: Dietz, 1971), 71–3.

¹⁸ Andreas Malycha, and Peter Jochen Winters, *Geschichte der SED: Von der Gründung bis zur Linkspartei* (München: C.H. Beck, 2009), 176–7.

¹⁹ See Horst Groschopp, "Atheismus und Realsozialismus in der DDR," *humanismus aktuell* 11 (2007): 62–83. A reference to the Marxist Sociology of Religion in the GDR is missing in Detlef Pollack's overview of the Sociology of Religion in Germany since 1945. Detlef Pollack, *Religion und gesellschaftliche Differenzierung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 29–66.

cupation zones.²⁰ Especially the interaction between SMAD and the churches in the year 1945/46 have been evaluated as positive by church historian Martin Onnasch. The churches received licenses for their own official journals, were officially represented in various state organizations and even had the possibility of broadcasting radio sermons starting July 1945 on Berlin Broadcasting.²¹ Dealings were accordingly influenced by a certain pragmatism during the first post-war years, in order to handle the daily problems efficiently and with as little conflict as possible.

It was only from 1947 onwards and with the increasing East-West confrontation, in a period in which the Soviet-protected Socialist Unity Party of the GDR (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands – SED) transformed into a party of a ‘new kind,’ that a confrontational attitude began to develop within the SED towards the churches. As a consequence of this initially slow development, an increasing number of church representatives withdrew from state committees and party organizations.²²

The hostile attitude within the SED towards the churches resulted not only from ideological differences. Especially representatives of Protestantism in Germany had fought a ‘culture war’ against communism between 1918 and 1933.²³ Furthermore, Catholic and Protestant representatives throughout Europe quite often expressed sympathy for fascist organizations, as their fight against communism offered ideological points of contact with the anti-communist attitude of the churches.²⁴ Accordingly, support for Hitler and his party was especially large in Germany among Protestant vicars. Additionally, large parts of Christian congregations in Germany were sympathetic towards the terror of the Nazis against communists and social democrats starting in 1933.²⁵ Because a large part of the leadership elite of the SED had experienced Nazi terror themselves, which had caused the death of many leading communists and social democrats, the hostile attitude of the SED and its representatives towards the churches after 1945 is understandable.²⁶

20 Martin Onnasch, “Die Situation der Kirchen in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone 1945–1949,” *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 2, no. 1 (1989): 214.

21 Onnasch, “Die Situation,” 217–8.

22 Onnasch, “Die Situation,” 218–9.

23 See Paul Hanebrink, “European Protestants Between Anti-Communism and Anti-Totalitarianism: The Other Interwar Kulturkampf?,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 52 (2017): 3. [Article first published online 21/7/2017; doi:10.1177/0022009417704894]

24 Olaf Blaschke, *Die Kirchen und der Nationalsozialismus* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2014), 15–41.

25 Blaschke, *Die Kirchen*, 111.

26 Of course, there were also members and church representatives who openly advocated socialist ideas and were close to social democrats and communists. However, in the first half of

The onset of an extensive wave of propaganda and agitation against churches by the SED, however, needs to be seen in combination with developments in the Soviet Union. With the death of Stalin and the takeover of power by Nikita Khrushchev, a broad propaganda mission in aid of atheism began in the summer of 1954.²⁷ Only a short time later, the GDR followed with a first wave of (initially very dubious and partly clumsy) publications which proclaimed atheism as the new scientific ideology and simultaneously took an aggressive stance towards churches and religion.²⁸ At the same time, the GDR leadership reintroduced the so-called Jugendweihe (youth initiation ritual),²⁹ which led to the first important confrontation between church and state leadership.³⁰ A new, intensified anti-religion campaign in 1958 in the Soviet sphere, which aimed at the introduction of secular festive rituals as well as the stronger crackdown on religious communities and was essentially "atheist propaganda,"³¹ would also herald the start of scientific research into atheism in the GDR.³²

the twentieth century the churches, especially Protestant, were dominated by conservative, nationalist and Christian-völkisch forces. On the religious socialists, see Ulrich Peter: *Der Bund der religiösen Sozialisten in Berlin von 1919 bis 1933* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1995).

27 Atko Remmel, "(Anti)-Religious Aspects of the Cold War: Soviet Religious Policy as Applied in the Estonian SSR," in *Behind the Iron Curtain: Soviet Estonia in the Era of the Cold War*, ed. Tõnu Tannberg (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2015), 360–1. State action against alleged enemies of socialist ideology already began during Stalin's lifetime in the GDR. See Malycha, and Winters, *Geschichte*, 55.

28 Regarding the latter, see especially the book first published in 1959 by Günter Heyden and Horst Ullrich, *Im Namen Gottes* (Berlin [East]: Neues Leben, 1959). Similarly to the way in which the National Socialists painted a permanently objectionable picture of Judaism in their propaganda using caricatures, insinuations and conspiracy theories for history and the present, the authors in this book created an image accordingly regarding Christianity and the Church.

29 The GDR leadership initially abolished the Jugendweihe in 1950, which had developed during the 19th century, in order to secure the collaboration with Christians regarding the establishment of a socialist German state.

30 Günter Wirth, "Zu dem Aufsatz von Hans Lutter 'Zur Geschichte des Atheismus in der DDR,'" *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* 44, no. 1 (2002): 109.

31 Remmel, "(Anti)-Religious Aspects," 361.

32 In March 1958, the Central Committee of the SED forced the withdrawal of all party members from churches. Simultaneously, a stronger emphasis was to be placed on atheistic propaganda among party members. Hans Lutter, "Zur Geschichte des Atheismus in der DDR," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* 43, no. 2 (2001): 73.

3 The institutionalization of Marxist sociology of religion in the GDR until 1969

As in most areas of the GDR, the initiative for a scientific examination of atheism came from the Soviet Union.³³ Following this, first loosely connected research networks formed at various universities in the German state in the second half of the 1950s. At the 6th party conference of the SED in January 1963, the party introduced the goal of initiating a new consciousness in the actions of its people in addition to the implementation of socialism. Accompanied by this, a stronger debate in the area of socialist ideology including the scientifically reasoned atheist worldview was to be implemented. The population's behavior under socialism should be influenced by the use of "qualified propaganda" with regard to materialism and atheism in such a way that "idealistic ideas are repressed and eradicated."³⁴ Such a task should include three central elements: a scientific critique of religion with a high-level line of argumentation, popular science publications and training staff to implement the scientific-atheist mass propaganda.³⁵ For this purpose, an academic chair for Scientific Atheism was installed at the University of Jena on the 5th of December, 1963,³⁶ which was supposed to function as a kind of center that would cover all of these areas. The initial plan was to attempt to obtain data through empirical inquiries using the keyword 'Marxist Sociology of Religion,' which could later be used for atheistic propaganda.³⁷ In popular science, the aim was to implement a juxtaposition of (natural-)scientific knowledge versus religious beliefs. A confrontational discussion with socialist ethical reasoning on the one side and Christian values on the other should also take

33 A complete list of research conducted up until 1965 on atheism can be found in the Federal Archive Berlin (Bundesarchiv Berlin) [BArch] DR 3, 2960 [no pagination].

34 BArch DR 3, 2960 [no pagination] (Reasoning on 25th November 1963 for the establishment of the academic chair for Scientific Atheism in Jena).

35 BArch DR 3, 2960 [no pagination] (Reasoning on 25th November 1963 for the establishment of the academic chair for Scientific Atheism in Jena).

36 The academic chair was named 'Scientific Atheism' ('Wissenschaftlicher Atheismus'); the methodological focus of scientific activities lay on the Sociology of Religion.

37 Even before the academic chair surveys were carried out by later members of staff in reference to the 6th party conference, in order to examine the 'development of socialist consciousness' among employees of companies in Jena. BArch DY 30/IV A 2/9.04/405 [no pagination]. The SED party conference in January 1963 can be seen as the kick-off for profound research into the transformation of an individual into a socialist human being – and therefore to an alleged atheist.

place. Training for propagandists, however, was not the initial focus of the activities of this academic chair.³⁸

At this point, the impression should not arise that a scientific examination of atheism did not take place before the party conference resolution of 1963. However, the revised objective of the SED institutionalized this scientific examination. It also becomes clear that the entire research program directly depended on the good will of party politics, which was to have a marked impact only a few years after the foundation of this academic chair.

The real reasons for eliminating the chair for Scientific Atheism in Jena in 1969 are still not transparent. What is clear is that differences were already increasing by 1964 concerning content and personality clashes between researchers and state representatives. In a file memo by the State Secretariat for Church Affairs on the 31st of January, 1967, it was remarked that the aforementioned academic chair in Jena had implemented a change in its profile. Henceforth, the "establishment of a mass atheistic consciousness" would be the focus of the institute's activity.³⁹ This demonstrates that the staff were forced to give up their previous focus on an empirically functioning 'Marxist Sociology of Religion.' The closure of the academic chair, however, was not yet mentioned in the plan to reform the University of Jena study program in 1967.⁴⁰ The decision to close the chair would have been made by the responsible ministries and party representatives due to the conflicts of the previous years.

In spring 1964, Jena scientists planned a survey composed of anonymous questionnaires given to pupils in the 11th grade in Leipzig asking about their ideological and political attitudes. Whereas the responsible authorities in Leipzig consented to such a survey, it was prohibited by the central State Secretariat for Higher and Technical Education on the 15th of April, 1966, after the questionnaires had already been printed and were just about to be distributed.⁴¹ Because no authorization for such a survey was given by any central state agency, the

38 BArch DR 3, 2960 [no pagination] (Reasoning on 25th November 1963 for the establishment of the academic chair for Scientific Atheism in Jena).

39 BArch DO 4/628 [no pagination].

40 BArch DY 30/ IV A 2/ 9.04/429 [no pagination]. In the realignment of research into Marxism-Leninism, debated since 1968, there is no longer any reference to religion. BArch DY 30/ IV A 2/ 9.04/124 [no pagination]. On top of the differences between staff of the academic chair and state agencies, it seems to have come to a realignment of interests. On the part of the state, an active scientific examination of atheism was not a priority, which would have additionally facilitated the decision to close the academic chair in 1969.

41 BArch DR 3/ 2960 (1. Schicht) [no pagination].

chief scientist, Olaf Klohr,⁴² was summoned to explain himself in front of the State Secretariat in person, but he repeatedly ignored the requests.⁴³

Additionally, the Department of Sciences (Philosophy/History Section) of the Central Commission (ZK) of the SED sharply criticized work previously carried out by the academic chair. Marxist Sociology of Religion was explicitly condemned by the Department, which needs to be understood as a rejection of all further quantitative investigations.⁴⁴ Instead, the chair was supposed to examine only the ‘theoretical pervasion of atheism as a characteristic of Marxist philosophy.’ Furthermore, there was the scathing assessment which stated that previous work by the chair had lacked any clear line of inquiry.⁴⁵ A report by the Department of Sciences at the SED’s ZK from the 15th of July, 1966, concerning the manuscript of the book *Marxist Sociology of Religion*, which had been written by the significant protagonists of the chair in Jena, explicitly states that the previous theses on the sociology of religion by atheism researchers⁴⁶ were comprehensively rejected by the state.⁴⁷ This massive intervention by state authorities ended publically available scientific research on atheism in Jena. Although the staff at the chair could stay in Jena until 1969, there were no larger research projects carried out after that incident according to present knowledge.

State authorities founded two new research institutes on atheism on the Baltic coast in 1970, far from the scientific gravitational centers. Scientific research carried out there was not meant for general public use. This meant that publically available research on atheism in the GDR ended in 1969.

42 Olof Klohr (1927–1994) was Head of Scientific Atheism between 1963 and 1969 in Jena. After its closure, Klohr took on the Chair of the new Institute for Dialectic and Historical Materialism at the School for Nautical Engineering Warnemünde (Ingenieurhochschule für Seefahrt Warnemünde). There, he managed the research group Scientific Atheism (Wissenschaftlicher Atheismus), which, however, never brought its findings to the public. See Günther Buch, *Namen und Daten wichtiger Personen in der DDR*, 4th edition (Berlin [Ost]: Dietz, 1984), 241; Entry ‘Olof Klohr’ in *Catalogus Professorum Rostochiensium*. <http://purl.uni-rostock.de/cpr/00003106>.

43 BArch DR 3/ 2960 (1. Schicht) [no pagination].

44 A state intervention, which stopped empirical research on the sociology of religion, can be established for the USSR already in the 1920s. Cf. the article by Johannes Gleixner in this volume.

45 BArch DR 3/ 2960 (1. Schicht) [no pagination].

46 The theses are not presented in the report. The author has not yet been able to locate the unpublished manuscript.

47 BArch DY 30/ IV A 2/ 9.04/202 [no pagination].

4 The classification of religion by the Marxist sociology of religion in the GDR

In the years up to 1969, a strictly functionalist interpretation of religion as coined by Karl Marx was significant for Scientific Atheism and therefore for Marxist Sociology of Religion as its component. Researchers interpreted the establishment of religion exclusively as a process of securing feudal and later bourgeois claims to power. As a consequence of a deliberate and focused contrasting of scientific theory against religious teachings – the researchers referred to almost only Christian teachings – the triumph of science over religion was supposed to be achieved. Such a triumph acted along the maxims of historical materialism, which attributed the function of legitimizing bourgeois sovereignty solely to religion. In compliance with the alleged transition to socialism, understood as a matter of course, an active overcoming of religion by a 'scientific worldview' had to take place. The alleged oppression of the 'common man' in capitalism kept the necessity of religion alive in the Western world. In socialism, however, where there was no such oppression – apparently – religion also lost its function as offering the consolation of a better life in the hereafter. In the imagination of atheism researchers in the GDR, in socialism people could concentrate completely on this life, in which they would never again experience oppression. Personal hardship, such as death, illness, etc., was explained with the help of scientific evidence,⁴⁸ so that, in the expectations of those atheism representatives, religion was completely devoid of its function.⁴⁹

Such an exclusively functionalist interpretation of religion in society as a legitimization and power-securing institution of the ruling class was (and still is), however, not uniquely found in socialist atheism researchers. In a similar manner, Pierre Bourdieu writes in his article *Genèse et structure du champ religieux*, published in 1971, that religion has a heightened legitimizing function in society

⁴⁸ One hoped to clarify to the population why people got ill or even died by explaining the function of germs. If they understood this function, then they would no longer identify as religious because all events on earth could be explained, thus rendering the operation of a transcendent power unnecessary.

⁴⁹ See in detail Dirk Schuster, "Das Postulat vom baldigen Ende der Religion. Die DDR-Religionssoziologie über eine Zukunft ohne Gott," in *Zurück in die Zukunft? Die Bedeutung von Diskursen über "Zukunft" in der Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, eds. Dominik Groß, and Klaus Freitag (Kassel: University Press, 2017), 91–102.

in favor of the privileged.⁵⁰ For Bourdieu, lay people do not only expect to receive answers to classic questions of theodicy from religion, such as the purpose of illness, death, etc. The French sociologist sees in the function of religion “also and especially justifications for existing in a certain societal position, and existing as they do, i. e. with all characteristics that cling to them in society.”⁵¹ From a sociological perspective, therefore, the “religious state of affairs” should be understood “as a legitimizing expression of a social position,” according to Bourdieu.⁵² The interpretation of religion according to Bourdieu as a basis for the legitimation of social position or the justification of social inequality is based on the adaptation of Karl Marx’s interpretation of religion, which shines through.⁵³

Whereas Bourdieu tried to offer an analysis of religion and thereby make religion explicable in society through his interpretation, the atheism researchers in the GDR increasingly aimed at an interpretation of the future. For them, the function of religion had already been distinctly proven by the theoretical classics of socialism. At the beginning of the 1960s, therefore, the aim was merely to empirically prove the Marxist ‘dogma’ that religion must die in socialism as a result of losing its function.

A second characteristic of atheism research in the GDR – as of all science in the Soviet-dominated sphere – was that it took notice of research from the ‘West.’ Scientific publications were exchanged extensively, although there were hardly any close relationships between researchers of the two blocs of power.⁵⁴ However, Thomas Schott indicates in his study that the sciences in countries of the Eastern Bloc were influenced less by scientific findings from their socialist neighbors:

50 Pierre Bourdieu, “Genèse et structure du champ religieux,” *Revue française de sociologie* 12, no. 3 (1971): 295–334. I henceforth use the German translation of the texts from Pierre Bourdieu, *Das religiöse Feld. Texte zur Ökonomie des Heilsgeschehens*, ed. by Stephan Egger, Andreas Pfeuffer and Franz Schultheis (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 2000), 39–111.

51 Bourdieu, *Das religiöse Feld*, 70.

52 Bourdieu, *Das religiöse Feld*, 71.

53 Frederik Elwert points out that Bourdieu’s theory of capital builds on Marx’s class theory. Frederik Elwert, “Das Kapital religiöser Gemeinschaften – Ideen zur Adaption neuerer Kapitaltheorien in der Religionswissenschaft,” *Zeitschrift für junge Religionswissenschaft* 2, no. 1 (2007), 33–56, http://www.zjr-online.net/journal/ii012007/pdf/ZJR_felwert2007.pdf. Also, Bourdieu’s model of the religious field is based heavily on Karl Marx’s interpretation of religion. See Bryan Turner, “Pierre Bourdieu and the Sociology of Religion,” in *The Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu: Critical Essays*, eds. Simon Susan, and Bryan Turner (London/New York: Anthem Press, 2011), 239–40. At this time, it is not known whether representatives of Scientific Atheism in the GDR based their argumentation on Bourdieu, despite obvious closeness of thought.

54 Thomas Schott, “Soviet Science in the Scientific World System: Was It Autarchic, Self-Reliant, Distinctive, Isolated, Peripheral, Central?,” *Science Communication* 13, no. 4 (1992): 413.

American science was the world center of intellectual influence. All other places formed a periphery pervasively influenced by the center. Notably, research in every Eastern Bloc country was far more influenced by American science than by science in other Eastern Bloc countries. The Eastern Bloc was not an intellectually self-sufficient region but instead was part of the intellectual periphery around the American center of influence.⁵⁵

This becomes visible regarding the GDR in the fact that in the years analyzed by Schott, 1973 and 1986, GDR researchers published articles much more frequently in North American than in Soviet or other East European publications.⁵⁶ Although studies on Scientific Atheism emerged early on in the Soviet Union, GDR representatives of this discipline mainly oriented themselves around activities from the Western scientific arena. A letter on the future concept of the academic chair from 1966 – before the abovementioned controversies arose concerning its future orientation – described general contacts to researchers and research institutes from countries of the Eastern Bloc. However, it explains in detail with which circles West Germany maintained contact and with which scientific publications it had agreements to exchange literature.⁵⁷

Notice was taken in Jena of the developments in the West European and American Sociology of Religion, which was at its pinnacle at the time.⁵⁸ Scientific evaluations of new results in this field were mainly an assessment of West European or American research findings rather than results from Soviet areas of influence.

The philosopher and historian Martin Robbe attempted to implicate the West German discipline of Religious Studies in supporting the church due to its theoretical character, such as in his 1963 article in the *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* (*German Journal of Philosophy*), the official voice on socialist philosophy in the GDR. A Marxist discipline of Religious Studies needed to be established, he said, which takes the theory of Marx and Engels as the basis for all research, in

55 Schott, "Soviet Science," 427.

56 Schott, "Soviet Science," 426.

57 BArch DR 3/ 2960 (1. Schicht) [no pagination]. The journals received regularly in Jena included the *International Yearbook for the Sociology of Religion* (*Internationale Jahrbuch für Religionssoziologie*), *Social Compass*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* and *Archives of Sociology of Religion* (*Archives de Sociologie de Religion*).

58 Cf. e.g. the examination of the classics of sociology of religion by Johann Klügl, which had been rediscovered at the time (Weber, Troeltsch, Durkheim), in which he also commented on the publications by Talcott Parsons. Johann Klügl, "Die bürgerliche Religionssoziologie und ihre Funktion im ideologischen System des staatsmonopolistischen Systems," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 15, no. 6 (1967), 671–90.

order to counteract such a ‘bourgeois-capitalist’ approach. The dogmatic reading of Marx and Engels becomes clearer when Robbe writes:

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels have found [the answers to the relationship between religious apparitions and social life]. [...] With historical materialism, they developed the methodological basis for appropriate activities in Religious Studies [...].⁵⁹

The construction becomes especially clear with this example: Knowledge about religion no longer took place before the backdrop of an exchange of arguments. Rather, the ideology of Marx and Engels was dogmatized into an irrevocable truth and thus preempted the frame of the discourse. Breaches of such an interpretation caused an immediate accusation of ‘bourgeoisie’ mentality.

5 Conclusion

The Soviet Military Administration’s previously liberal policy concerning religion was displaced by a restrictive and confrontational political line with the SED’s establishment of power at the end of the 1940s. At the end of the 1950s, a scientification of atheism and the critique of religion forcefully implemented by the state took place following an initial period of anti-church propaganda, which resulted in the development of Marxist Sociology of Religion in the GDR. Representatives of this discipline aimed to prove the Marxist dogma of the death of religion in socialism – which was not questioned at any point in time – with empirical data. Surveys among different professional groups and age categories of the GDR population were supposed to demonstrate the correlation between the increase in socialist consciousness and the simultaneous decrease in religious perception, and ultimately the validity of Marx’s paradigm. Taking Jo Reichertz’s concept of the generation of knowledge as a foundation, Marxist Sociology of Religion operated as any modern scientific approach up to this point in time: A theory based on observation and an corresponding interpretation of future developments (Marx’s concept of the death of religion in socialism) should be examined using empirical research (anonymous surveys on the meaning of religion). This was, however, not an open-ended examination. The result of the investigation (the validity of Marx’s theory) had been established right from the start. Additionally, this way of generating knowledge did not take place in open competition: Due to the totalitarian socialism of Soviet influence,

⁵⁹ Martin Robbe, “Philosophische Probleme der Religionswissenschaft,” *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 11, no. 11 (1963): 1379.

criticism or even rejection of Marx's or Lenin's teachings was impossible anyway.⁶⁰ Any study always had to end with the same result. It was possible to criticize 'bourgeois' Sociology of Religion, but only because it was not necessary to ground the discussion on a foundation of scientific discourse and reasoning. It was assumed that because the 'bourgeois' Sociology of Religion did not take Marx's theory as the basis for all exploration, it would always end with incorrect results that ultimately merely served the 'preservation of power' of the churches.

As a consequence of the outlined power-political developments in the GDR in the 1960s and early 70s, as well as the differences between the researchers in Jena and the state authorities, a change in the generation of knowledge concerning Marxist Sociology of Religion took place. The rulers (state and party) withdrew their protection of scientists, because they did not find the empirical demonstration of Marx's theory opportune. It was not about the result – the validity of Marx. It was ultimately a matter of how evidence of the 'truth' should be produced. Because the people in power did not want these 'truths' proven by empirical research (i. e. by the Sociology of Religion),⁶¹ specialists (in the Sociology of Religion) lost the foundation for their task. No longer were they experts assigned with generating knowledge. Ultimately, the method of generating knowledge was decisive for determining who had state legitimation for this, or for the 'truth.' Its end result, however, had already been determined due to the totalitarian ideology.

After the academic chair in Jena was closed down in 1969, researchers were still able to carry out studies in the Sociology of Religion. However, these examinations were no longer open to the public, but were rather used in state-internal analyses. The establishment and legitimation of Marx's teachings and therefore the entire ideology on which the GDR was based would take place in public by means of a forced conflict between science and religion.⁶² On the scientific level, the Marxist Sociology of Religion was finally displaced completely in the 1970s by the orientation towards a philosophical approach to the topic of religion in socialism.

⁶⁰ See Schmidt-Lux, *Wissenschaft*, 111–24.

⁶¹ Detailed ideological and power-political background information for this development was deliberately excluded here, because it still ultimately has to be determined.

⁶² Schmidt-Lux, *Wissenschaft*, 384.