

Revolution, Revelation and Reformation: Towards a Blochian Critique of East German Folk Atheism

Catherine Moir
(Department of Germanic Studies)

1. Introduction

The peaceful revolution of 1989 saw the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR) and capitalist Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) united under a new Basic Law. Social and economic freedoms previously the preserve of the West were now available to all German citizens. Many observers expected to see a resurgence of religious activity, following decades of suppression under the rule of the Marxist-Leninist SED party. However, far from a renewal of religion, religiosity has continued to decline in the East, to the extent that some observers have declared ‘East German folk atheism’ (*ostdeutscher Volksatheismus*) a defining characteristic of the New Federal States, going so far as to describe it as a ‘third confession’ alongside Catholicism and Protestantism.¹ A critical account is conspicuously absent from the various theoretical and empirical approaches to secularisation in East Germany. East German folk atheism is therefore examined here both in its historical context and against the background of significant theoretical attempts to explain it as an extreme instance of secularisation. Drawing on the work of Ernst Bloch, this paper analyses the problem from a Marxist perspective. Rather than simply constituting a reform of traditional practices under a different guise, or even

1. C.f. Eberhard Tiefensee, ‘Religiös unmusikalisch? Ostdeutsche Mentalität zwischen Agnostizismus und flottierender Religiosität’ in J. Wanke, ed., *Wiedervereinigte Seelsorge – Die Herausforderungen der katholischen Kirche in Deutschland* (Leipzig: Benno, 2000), pp. 24-53.

representing a revolution in Germany's religious history, the paper argues that East German folk atheism can be seen to reveal certain fundamentals about the processual nature of social change that can help point the way towards a resolution of the sterile opposition of the religious and the secular.

2. East German Folk Atheism: Fact, Fiction and Theory

As evidenced by various public debates, atheism has become a marker of an East German identity and culture, the purported existence of which is a politically important and contentious question.² The ostensible lack of religion in the East of the country was termed 'East German folk atheism' by catholic theologian Eberhard Tiefensee as early as 2000 and the issue has since been taken up by the humanist Horst Groschopp, who has questioned whether the phenomenon can or should be seen as a 'third confession' in Germany, alongside Catholicism and Protestantism.³

The suggestion that such a thing as 'East German folk atheism' exists – and, what is more, constitutes a third confession – is problematic. First, as Groschopp himself admits, the idea implies an apparently insoluble contradiction between atheism as a rejection of religion and religion itself.⁴ Second, the specific designation of the phenomenon as East German refers to a political territory that no longer exists. The further qualification of atheism as having a 'folk' character implies the persistence of separate 'national' consciousnesses and heritage within the unified Germany.⁵ Moreover, the debate between theologians and humanists over the existence and significance of East German folk atheism appears at least implicitly to

2. For example, c.f. "'Ossi"-Diskriminierung: Klägerin stellt sich auf langen Streit ein' in *Der Spiegel*, available online at: <http://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/soziales/0,1518,688252,00.html> [accessed 1 October 2011] ; for more on the debate over German antidiscrimination law, see *International League of Non-Religious and Atheists* at: <http://www.ibka.org/node/602> [accessed 1 October 2011] and *Aktion für Geistige und Psychische Freiheit* at: <http://www.agpf.de/Antidiskriminierungsgesetz.htm>; Wilhelm Grab and Thomas Thieme, *Religion oder Ethik? Die Auseinandersetzung um den Ethik- und Religionsunterricht in Berlin*, (V&R Unipress GmbH, 2010).

3. C.f. Tiefensee, 'Religiös unmusikalisch?', and Horst Groschopp, 'Ostdeutscher Atheismus – die dritte Konfession?', 2003, at Forschungsgruppe Weltanschauungen in Deutschland: www.fowid.de [accessed 1 October 2011].

4. Groschopp, 'Ostdeutscher Atheismus', p. 1.

5. Ibid.

revolve around the possibility for either group to ‘recruit’ those non-confessionals who do not also identify themselves as non-religious. For example, Tiefensee’s 2000 article, ‘Religious Unmusicality? East German Mentality Between Agnosticism and Floating Religiosity’, was published in an edited volume the title of which refers to the spiritual welfare of the reunited Germany as a ‘challenge’ for the Catholic Church.⁶ On the other hand, in his foreword to a 2005 edition of *Humanismus aktuell* dealing with the German *Humanistischen Akademie*’s project on Atheism and Humanism, Horst Groschopp points out that not all non-confessionals in Germany, nor all those that understand themselves as humanist, define themselves as atheist. The interest in non-religion and in particular atheism for organised humanism is presumably expansionary as well as purely scholarly.⁷ The question of whether the Eastern states are in fact ‘devoutly’ or ‘impenetrably’ atheist can therefore be seen to have far-reaching political and social implications.

While the picture is admittedly complex, empirical studies do demonstrate that both objective and subjective markers of religiosity are much lower in the Eastern German states. For instance, Pollack has shown that only around 25% of citizens in the Eastern states identify themselves as religious.⁸ Of these, 21% are Evangelical Protestants and, as figures from regional and provincial church records indicate, year on year more people leave the Evangelical church in the Eastern states than join it, with the ratio in 2007 standing at 2.1:1.⁹ Meanwhile, in their study on secularisation in East Germany before and after the *Wende*, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, Uta Karstein and Thomas Schmidt-Lux suggest that 50% of the population in the Eastern states identify themselves explicitly as atheist.¹⁰

Various theoretical frameworks have been implemented in attempting to explain this situation. For instance, Wohlrab-Sahr et al. employ a conflict theoretical

6. Tiefensee, ‘Religiös unmusikalisch? Ostdeutsche Mentalität zwischen Agnostizismus und flottierender Religiosität’, 2000.

7. *Humanismus aktuell*, Heft 17, Herbst 2005, 9. Jahrgang.

8. Detlef Pollack, *Rückkehr des Religiösen? Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland und Europa II*, Mohr Siebeck, 2009, p. 126.

9. Pollack, 2009, p. 130.

10. Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, Uta Karstein, Thomas Schmidt-Lux, *Forcierte Säkularität: Religiöser Wandel und Generationendynamik im Osten Deutschlands*, (Campus Verlag, 2009), p. 13.

framework.¹¹ The authors insist that ‘conceptualizing the secularization process in East Germany mainly in terms of repression tends to neglect that conflicts on the macro level—for example, between Church and state—do not simply penetrate lifeworlds from above but always need an interpretative frame’.¹² Based on a cross-generational anthropological study coupled with historical analysis, this approach suggests that the ruling SED party’s establishment of an ideology of ‘scientific atheism’ in the GDR remained not only political, but acquired subjective plausibility for citizens through the Party’s successful implementation of propagandistic and pedagogical measures.¹³ It was possible for scientific atheism to become a ‘subjective motif of secularization’ primarily because the ideology of the scientific worldview was already broadly accepted.¹⁴ The authors argue that,

What happened in the GDR was the mutual intensification of competition and conflict. The state did not only offer competing cults and ideologies. Rather, it offered a complete substitute for religion [...] This interpretative frame legitimized people’s decisions about membership and participation’.¹⁵

It is further suggested that this frame has ‘survived the system that created it’, resulting in a secular habitus that still ‘pursues the central dichotomies of the conflict communication’.¹⁶ While, on the basis of historical and empirical data, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr et al. convincingly argue that the GDR secularisation process ‘gained the features of religious politics but in a modern guise’, the relationship between Christian theology and Marxist ideology is not explored.¹⁷

11. Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, Uta Karstein, Thomas Schmidt-Lux, ‘Secularization as Conflict’ in *Social Compass* 55 (no. 2, 2008).

12. Wohlrab-Sahr et al., ‘Secularization as Conflict’, p. 129.

13. C.f. Wohlrab-Sahr et al., *Forcierte Säkularität*.

14. Wohlrab-Sahr et al., ‘Secularization as Conflict’, p. 130.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

16. *Ibid.*,

17. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

Detlef Pollack has invoked a variety of theoretical approaches in attempting to explain religious change in Germany since the *Wende* ('turning point', a German term used to refer to the change that took place in 1989), most notably Thomas Luckmann's privatisation theory of religious change.¹⁸ Pollack suggests that empirical data from across Germany indicates a decline in both institutional and extra-institutional (i.e. subjective spirituality) religiosity, contrary to Luckmann's assertion that the deinstitutionalisation and individualisation of religion are complementary processes.¹⁹ For Luckmann, religiosity is an anthropological constant: only through the institutionalisation of certain social forms of religion—namely those that have prioritised the 'sacred cosmos' familiar from Luckmann's work with Peter L. Berger—does the distinction between 'religion' and 'society' arise.²⁰ Thus he argues that the overall level of religiosity in society is constant—only the social forms of religion change, hence the deinstitutionalisation of religion ought to correlate inversely with a growth in extra-institutional forms of religion and statements of non-specific, subjective spirituality. Pollack suggests that this is not the case, demonstrating that neither 'new social forms' of religion nor levels of individual, non-confessional spirituality have increased at the expense of churchly religiosity.²¹ Notwithstanding the complexities of interactions between institutional and non-institutional forms of religion, Pollack argues that religiosity in general in Germany is declining.²² Pollack appears to reject Luckmann's individualisation theory as a permutation of the traditional secularisation thesis, while simultaneously describing the trend to secularisation in Germany as 'dominant'.²³ Meanwhile, his attempt to explain the changes in the religious and church situation in East Germany since 1989 relies heavily on historical explanations of church-state relations that, while nuanced, still present the secularisation process as linear and inevitable, also largely ignoring intersections between theology and ideology.

18. C.f. Detlef Pollack, *Säkularisierung – ein moderner Mythos? Studien zum religiösen Wandel in Deutschland und Europa*, (Mohr Siebeck, 2003) and Pollack, *Rückkehr des Religiösen?*.

19. Pollack, *Säkularisierung*, p. 181.

20. Thomas Luckmann, *Die unsichtbare Religion* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 105.

21. Pollack, *Säkularisierung*, pp. 181-182.

22. *Ibid*, p. 182.

23. Pollack, *Säkularisierung*, pp. 147/148; p. 182.

The persistence of atheism in the absence of a state controlling the ‘supply’ of religion in society poses a particular stumbling block for advocates of the rational-choice theory of religion, which argues for a supply-side model of religious change. Rational choice theory proposes that religion, like any other commodity, is provided on a market subject to the same laws of supply and demand as an economic market.²⁴ Far from being a function of religious ‘demand’, as the classical secularisation theory would have it, rational choice holds that levels of religiosity in society are governed by the supply of religious goods to the market, which is regulated directly by the state and influenced by the presence of monopolistic ‘firms’ (i.e. state-supported churches). The theory would therefore expect a revival of religion following the collapse of the oppressive East German regime. Steven Pfaff and Paul Froese have put forward a rational choice explanation for the persistence of atheism in the newly competitive, pluralistic unified German market. They propose that,

A unique combination of weak monopoly churches prior to communism, strong substitution-oriented anti-religious policies during communism, and new religious circumstances produced by German reunification explain the religious exceptionalism of eastern Germany’.²⁵

The ‘new circumstances’ referred to here are described as re-regulation of the religious market via mechanisms such as the subsumption of the East German Lutheran Church into the monopolistic West German structure and state regulation of the religious market using church taxes.²⁶ Apart from the objection that it perpetuates a rationalist framework that has elective affinities with the ideology of neoliberalism, notably including the presentation of economic laws as natural and a profound mistrust of the state, a fundamental problem with Froese and Pfaff’s analysis is arguably that the desecularisation thesis apparently refuted by the East

24. C.f. Lawrence A. Young (ed.), *Rational Choice and Religion: Summary and Assessment* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

25. Paul Froese and Steven Pfaff, ‘Explaining a Religious Anomaly: A Historical Analysis of Secularization in Eastern Germany’ in *Social Forces* 44 (no. 4, 2005), p. 403.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 412-413.

German case can also be seen as a simple theoretical inversion of the secularisation thesis. In rational-choice theory, religious pluralism—generally seen as a function of a ‘modern’ society—is thought to result in an increase in religiosity. Modernity, on this account, is seen as going hand in hand not with secularisation, but with desecularisation. The theory therefore restates a linear trajectory of religious change only in inverted form.

The inversion by rational choice theory of the classical secularisation thesis reveals what is also apparent in the other studies: while the classical secularisation thesis developed by early sociologists such as Durkheim and Weber has lost currency, its central questions remain unanswered by contemporary competing theories. Namely, what is religion, why does it exist and under what circumstances does or may it cease to do so? Marx famously described religion as the ‘opium of the people’, by which he meant that it was ‘at one and the same time, the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering’.²⁷ Marx’s suggestion was that religion appears as a utopian and inverted picture of the material world, because the material world is itself inverted. The alleviation of man’s debased worldly condition, it was posited, would lead to the transcendence of the dichotomy between ‘religion’ and ‘society’ familiar to Luckmann. Marxist approaches to secularisation are notably absent from the literature on East Germany, perhaps because the now all-but-defunct idea that religion would inevitably decline as a function of modernity is often – incorrectly – attributed to him.²⁸ However, given the historical circumstances in East Germany, it is perhaps also surprising that a Marxist perspective is absent. As a post-Marxist thinker who developed a specific theory of secularisation, Bloch’s utopian philosophy therefore deserves closer attention.

3. Atheism in Christianity: Bloch’s Critical Theory of Secularisation

In contrast to the objectives of the various sociological theories that have been used to analyse religious change in East Germany, Bloch’s theory is by its own

27. Karl Marx, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right’, 1843–44, taken from *Marxists.org*: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm> [accessed 1 October 2011].

28. However, for an interesting volume dedicated to Marxist and critical approaches to religion, see Warren S. Goldstein, ed., *Marx, Critical Theory and Religion*, (Brill, 2009).

admission critical in the Marxian sense that it aimed not only or primarily to explain the world, but to do so in order to change it. His central objection to empiricism was that it does not account for the dynamic, processual nature of the world.²⁹ That is not to say that a Blochian study cannot find empirical approaches instructive: certainly in considering the development of East German folk atheism, empirical data is useful in demonstrating the trend towards secularisation, while historical analysis serves to illustrate some of the complexities at stake. However, it is important to note that Bloch's theory is rooted in twentieth-century Marxist criticism and does not, therefore, attempt to be 'value-free'.

a) Messianism and Marxism

Bloch develops his theory of secularisation throughout his work, but most thoroughly in his *Atheism in Christianity*.³⁰ The text is a work of biblical exegesis—as Boer puts it, Bloch is 'fully conversant with the high moment of German biblical scholarship in the early twentieth century—in which Bloch seeks to read the Bible not with a theological agenda, but using a hermeneutic of class conflict.³¹ Bloch insists upon the significance of the Bible for Marxists, who, he suggests, all too often overlook it on atheistic principles, yet the Bible is also the book of the peasants and workers and resounds with the voices of the weak and oppressed. In Bloch's words,

'Implicit in Marxism – as the leap from the Kingdom of Necessity to that of Freedom – there lies the whole so subversive and un-static heritage of the Bible...So far as it is possible to read the Bible with the eyes of the Communist Manifesto'.³²

It is based on this Marxist interpretation of the biblical text that Bloch effectively traces the development of secular Marxism out of Judaeo-Christian Messianism. The motor for this process of secularisation is the contradiction, not between atheism and Christianity, but within Christianity itself. Not only is Marxism prefigured, according to Bloch, in the rebellious biblical spirit of Messianism, but utopian,

29. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume 1*, (London: Blackwell, 1986), p. 222.

30. Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, (London: Verso, 2009).

31. Roland Boer, *Criticism of Heaven: on Marxism and Theology* (Brill, 2007), p. 4.

32. Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, p. 57.

eschatological, humanist and universalist dimensions of Christianity are also implicit in what Bloch calls the ‘warm stream’ of Marxism. One can also see negative parallels between Christianity and Marxism, in particular in the GDR context, for example in the way in which ideology can be used to construct and control a state, although Bloch does not dwell on this observation, preferring rather to reduce the negative aspects of religion to conservatism.

The biblical Messianism to which Bloch refers in this context is a current of political theology that invokes rebellion against religious and secular authority. In *Atheism in Christianity*, Bloch asserts that Marxism has developed out of Judeo-Christian Messianism based on an inherently atheistic logic that can be seen to develop throughout the Bible. This logic can be seen to consist of three intensifying moments in the Bible. First, Bloch points to the rejection of, or rebellion against God by key biblical figures, a theme that he is able to elucidate using his Marxist hermeneutic. He posits that, ‘the counter-blow against the oppressor is biblical too, and that is precisely why it has always been suppressed or distorted, from the serpent on’.³³ Bloch therefore traces this current right from Genesis, through the figure of Moses, to Jesus, with whom it becomes radicalised with his crucifixion. Thompson suggests that Christianity, as ‘the only religion worshipping a man who was forsaken by God’, provides ‘proof of the essentially secular and materialist basis for faith’.³⁴ According to Bloch, the figure of Jesus Christ as the ultimately forsaken Son of Man also demonstrates a movement in the Bible away from humanity’s belief in God to its belief in itself. The figure of the Son of Man is humanistic as well as messianic: it implies that humanity is the source of salvation.³⁵ The salvation of humanity in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ can also be seen to contribute to the development of an open-ended eschatology underpinned by the notion of ‘revelation’. While the importance of the resurrection event takes on particular significance with Paul, becoming the defining characteristic of Christian faith—what Alain Badiou has termed ‘fidelity to the Event’—Bloch suggests that it is present right from the Book of Exodus in which God, when asked to name himself, declares ‘I will be what I will be’. The Christian idea of revelation, therefore, implies for

33. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

34. *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

Bloch a dynamic, open-ended teleology in which the apocalyptic ‘end of days’ scenario signifies the ‘leap from the Kingdom of Freedom to the Kingdom of Necessity’ envisaged by Engels.

b) Kingdom and *Heimat*

The notion of the Kingdom so central to Christian eschatology is clearly echoed in Marxism. In Christianity, the Kingdom of God denotes a spatio-temporal realm in which the promise of the Abrahamic covenant will be fulfilled. Crucially, with the Pauline project of ‘the universality of truth, the conviction (*pistis*) that what is true is true for everyone and that the proper role of the subject is to make that truth known’, this realm would no longer be the preserve of the Jews, but was to encompass all humanity in a radical transformation of the heavens and the earth.³⁶ In light of Christianity’s universalist agenda, the New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation can be seen as a future utopian space in which the restoration of the Jewish Promised Land is both fulfilled and transcended in a Kingdom in which distinctions of nationality, race, faith and gender no longer make sense. Even the distinction between the divine and the human appears to be overcome as God ‘dwelling with man’ as opposed to the reverse brings the divine down to Earth:

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away ... Behold, I am making all things new. (Rev. 21: 3-5)

The parallel between this vision of history and Marx’s prediction of the advent of communist society in which class divisions are overcome is evident and it becomes more evident still in Bloch’s conception of the Kingdom, which he calls *Heimat*.

36. John D. Caputo and Linda Martín Alcoff, *St. Paul Among the Philosophers* (Indiana University Press, 2009), p.1.

Man everywhere is still living in prehistory, indeed all and everything still stands before the creation of the world, a right world. *True genesis is not at the beginning but at the end*, and it starts to begin only when existence and society become radical, i.e. grasp their roots. But the root of history is the working, creating human being who reshapes and overhauls the given facts. Once he has grasped himself and established what is his, without expropriation and alienation, in real democracy, there arises in the world something which shines into the childhood of all and in which no one has yet been: homeland (*Heimat*).³⁷

The apocalyptic image in which the world is destroyed and saved in a single dialectical moment is central to Bloch's understanding of the relationship between Messianism and Marxism. This moment—the revelation—constitutes the leap from the Kingdom of Necessity to that of Freedom or Truth. However, to understand Bloch's *Heimat* as a secularised Marxist form of the Christian Kingdom of God is arguably too simplistic a reading. For Bloch, they are one and the same thing: the Messianic and eschatological dimension of Christianity *is* Marxism, *ante rem*. Bloch says,

Religion is re-ligio, binding back. It binds its adherents back, first and foremost, to a mythical God of the Beginning, a Creator-God. So, rightly understood, adherence to the Exodus-figure called "I will be what I will be" and to the Christianity of the Son of Man and of the Eschaton, is no longer religion.³⁸

At one level, as Thompson explains, atheism for Bloch can therefore be understood simply as being 'against the Creator-God and the assumption of authority by the church and the state'.³⁹ However, there is more implied in Bloch's atheism, namely the idea of communism as an ultimate truth and as something that must be brought into being not by God, but by 'the working, creating human being' at the

37. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (MIT, 1996), pp. 1375-1376.

38. Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, p. xxx.

39. *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

root of history. If religion represents creation in the sense of a genetic binding to the ‘mythical God of the beginning’, atheism for Bloch must be seen to represent the synthesis—both materially and metaphysically—of a New Jerusalem based on the transcendence of the dichotomy between the divine and the human.

c) Ontology of the Not-Yet

One obvious objection to Bloch’s theory of secularisation is that it is based on a reading of the Bible that many would object to as just plain wrong. In particular his interpretations of the Book of Job goes against the grain of accepted, and even quite radical, biblical scholarship. A simple response to this justifiable criticism would be to reiterate Bloch’s exegetical intentions: to read the Bible not for spiritual nourishment or religious enlightenment, but with ‘the eyes of the Communist Manifesto’. In *Atheism in Christianity*, Bloch asserts that the atheistic logic inherent in Christianity, as described in the Bible itself, points towards a universal truth that there is, in fact, no God. Marxism emerges, he argues, as a secular development of the utopian and universalist Christ-impulse, which lives on ‘even when God is dead’.⁴⁰ If the Christ-impulse is indeed universalist as Bloch, Badiou and others have argued along with Paul, and if the ultimate truth is that there is no God, then the proper role of the subject to ‘make the truth known’ must effectively be to become an evangelical Marxist atheist. It seems this was the position taken by the SED in its suppression of religion in the GDR, whereby Marxism-Leninism itself became petrified as a sort of atheistic ‘religion’. Yet it has also been suggested here that atheism is for Bloch at once a foreshadowing (*Vorschein*) of the immanent historical possibility of communism and simultaneously a critical stance against the assumption of authority by the state, albeit, in the case of the GDR, a self-proclaimed and self-imposed communist one. In order to explore this contradiction more fully, Bloch’s theory of secularisation deserves to be located within his wider philosophy, which can be summarised as an ‘ontology of the Not-Yet’.

Briefly put, Bloch’s metaphysics posits that the world and everything in it, including humanity, is experimental, open and unfinished—or not-yet—in

40. Ibid., p. 167.

character.⁴¹ The process by which the ‘true’ character of the world is realised can be thought of in terms of expression, the purpose of which is the Hegelian idea of achieving ultimate unity of existence and essence. While the world expresses itself, as it were, for instance in processes of the physical transformation of matter, and humans can also be thought of as an expression of the world in that we are issued from it, for Bloch, as in Christianity, humans occupy a special position. As a result of our intelligence and reason, we are both able to ‘express’ ourselves, but also, crucially, we have the power to ‘express’ the truth inherent within the world, in that we ‘reshape and overhaul the given facts’. Bloch’s ontology therefore becomes an ontology of the Not-Yet as a process of becoming rather than a state of being. Humanity is both in itself ‘not-yet’—what Thompson calls a ‘human becoming’—and at the same time the key to deciphering the ‘true’ nature of the world, an idea that recalls Marx’s humanisation of nature and naturalisation of humanity.⁴² Bloch constantly defines this process of ‘becoming human’ as the simultaneous return to and creation of *Heimat*.

To reinsert a Blochian understanding of religion and atheism into this system, let us recall three conclusions drawn from Bloch’s critical theory. First, we said that according to Bloch there is no God and that this observation is in some way related to the universal ‘truth’ of the world. Second, we said that the role of the subject is to make the universal truth known, which would logically include the admission of atheism. However, if the world is not-yet true, as Bloch suggests, but rather universal truth is itself a process of becoming, then the ultimate resolution of the contradiction between Christianity and atheism depends on the recognition that there is truth in both of them and that in fact they share a truth. Perhaps this is what Bloch means when he says that ‘Messianism is the Red Secret of every revolutionary’? Although it is of course important not to conflate atheism with Marxism, nor revolutionary ambitions with religious ones. Nevertheless, seen from this perspective it is evident that Bloch’s critical project in *Atheism in Christianity* is to critique religion in a recognisably Marxist vein as ‘the illusory sun, which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself’.⁴³ For Bloch, secularisation can therefore

41. C.f. Ernst Bloch, *Experimentum Mundi* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985).

42. Ernst Bloch, *Tübinger Einleitung in die Philosophie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 12.

43. Marx, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’, p. 263

essentially be seen to describe the dynamic utopian movement by which humanity engages in a process of *autopoeisis*, literally ‘becomes itself’, but in its own image and not in an image imposed from above.

4. East German Folk Atheism in Historical Perspective

It goes without saying that it is beyond the scope of this article to present an exhaustive account of religious developments throughout Germany’s history. It is therefore apposite to focus specifically on the period in which East German folk atheism was shaped most dramatically, during the GDR period.

Sozialistische Heimat DDR

While freedom of religion was officially declared in the GDR and formally upheld, the relationship between the churches and the state was tense and often hostile. The ruling SED party was ideologically opposed to religion and even in the immediate post-war period pushed forward strict separation of church and state, such that the church no longer had any influence on religious instruction in schools, for example.⁴⁴ The state-church relationship in the GDR can roughly be divided into three stages. Under Party Chairman Walter Ulbricht, the SED pursued an aggressive secularisation policy, terminating the collection of church membership taxes and implementing a programme of ‘educational work’ (*Aufklärungsarbeit* —the German *Aufklärung* also means ‘enlightenment’) that included the compulsory teaching of dialectical materialism in schools and the introduction of the *Jugendweihe* as a secular ritual to replace confirmation.⁴⁵ When Karl Maron, then Interior Minister, and Otto Nuschke, Chairman of the CDU, demanded in 1955 that the churches sign a loyalty pact, their response was hostile. Otto Dibelius, Bishop of Berlin and President of the German Evangelical Church (EKD) signed a military chaplaincy pact with the FRG in 1957. The tensions escalated to such a degree that the 1961 *Kirchentag* could

44. Rudolf Mau, *Der Protestantismus im Osten Deutschlands, 1945-1990*, (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2005), pp. 21-31.

45. See Sascha Papke, *Die SED-Kirchenpolitik 1949-1954* (Norderstedt: GRIN Verlag, 2008). On *Jugendweihe*, see Joachim Chowanski and Rolf Dreier, *Die Jugendweihe. Eine Kulturgeschichte seit 1852* (Berlin: Das neue Berlin, 2000).

no longer be held in Berlin, with the border closing definitively just four weeks later.⁴⁶

The 1960s saw the German Evangelical church split as a result of the political pressures of division. In 1969, the regional Protestant churches in the East decided to form a ‘national’ association, the *Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen in der DDR* (BEK). The Honecker era saw the onset of *real existierender Sozialismus* (really-existing socialism), which, as contemporary commentators point out, paradoxically signalled the failure of the SED to build socialism successfully.⁴⁷ This was the era of the ‘church in socialism’ (*Kirche im Sozialismus*), in which the Evangelical church and the state acknowledged and tolerated one another in an internal political climate now characterised more by pragmatism than radicalism.⁴⁸ It is important to note that the Catholic Church never felt able to make such concessions to the regime and maintained a position of conscious opposition throughout this period, never recognising the GDR as a state.⁴⁹ However, since Protestantism was by far the most populous religion when the party came to power, the state’s central efforts of repression and *Ersatz* were concentrated against the Evangelical churches.

When the opposition movement in the GDR took shape during the late 1970s and 1980s, the Evangelical Church was at the forefront in calls for peace. Already in 1978, when the SED had introduced military education (*Wehrerziehung*) as a compulsory subject in schools, the BEK had responded by developing ‘education for peace’ (*Erziehung zum Frieden*) as an alternative programme.⁵⁰ As opposition intensified throughout the 1980s, so too did church-based opposition, with the Catholic Church also becoming more vocal. In particular, the ecumenical movement demonstrated unity among different religious and non-religious groupings for peace and democracy against the oppression and persecution of the regime. The *Kirchentag*

46. Mau, *Der Protestantismus*, pp. 67-78.

47. Peter Thompson, ‘Die unheimliche Heimat: The GDR and the Dialectics of Home’ in Karen Leeder, ed., *From Stasiland to Ostalgie* (Oxford German Studies, 2009), pp. 278-287.

48. Claudia Lepp, Kurt Novak, eds., *Evangelische Kirche im geteilten Deutschland, 1945-1989/90*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoe und Ruprecht, 2001), p. 179.

49. Christoph Kösters and Wolfgang Tischner, *Katholische Kirche in SBZ und DDR* (Schöningh, 2005).

50. C.f. Ehrhart Neubert, *Geschichte der Opposition in der DDR 1949-1989* (Berlin: Links, 1998), pp. 355-366.

von unten, held in June 1987 in a neutral community centre, symbolising the movement's broad social base, indicated that 'the church' as a forum for opposition now represented a social and political space that far surpassed its importance as a religious institution. However, from the very beginning, opposition—particularly within the Evangelical church—had ostensibly political aims, which can be illustrated by the participation of significant numbers of high-profile, largely atheist, and often devoutly socialist (although anti-SED) dissidents and intellectuals; from the 1970s onwards figures such as Wolf Biermann and Christa Wolf were involved in church-based opposition activities.⁵¹

One of the central factors contributing to the collapse of the GDR was the fact that the state did not come good on its promises of a brighter future. According to Fulbrook, in addition to the fact that the freer and more affluent West German consumer society was the economic and social benchmark,

The state's interventionist role, and its own self-proclaimed social policies—particularly in the era of 'the unity of social and economic policy' under Honecker—raised expectations among the populace which were not ultimately fulfilled.⁵²

The notion of the socialist *Heimat* was crucial to the state's attempt to garner support for its policies and construct the GDR as a socialist nation. Jan Palmowski has demonstrated how the concept of *Heimat* was transformed by the state from something inherently suspicious, reminiscent of the 'blood and soil' ideals of National Socialism, into 'an integral part of the socialist utopia'.⁵³ On the basis of the concept of *Heimat* as a crucial mediation between regional and national identities throughout German history, Palmowski traces the development of the concept of a specifically socialist *Heimat* as an ideological and political tool used to integrate

51. Neubert, *Geschichte der Opposition*, p. 310.

52. Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR 1949-1989* (Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 180.

53. Jan Palmowski, 'Building an East German Nation: The Construction of a Socialist Heimat, 1945-1961' in *Central European History* 3 (no. 3, 2004), p. 397.

diverse identities in a single socialist nation.⁵⁴ The state was able to use the concept as an instrument of propaganda and indoctrination via a variety of measures, including the teaching of *Heimatkunde* in schools and in preparation for the socialist *Jugendweihe* ritual, the creation of *Heimat* museums and films that foregrounded the cultural heritage of the Eastern states, and state-sponsored folklore festivals.⁵⁵ Having established the superiority of the *Heimat DDR*, the state was able to implicate homeland as a justification for border control, for example.⁵⁶ Palmowski locates the failure of the SED's *Heimatpolitik* in the tenacity of regional identities, mediated via what he calls *Eigen-Sinn*, defined as 'the individual meanings through which power [...] is perceived and expressed through social practice, at the level of the everyday'.⁵⁷

While Palmowski's account of the importance of the concept of a socialist *Heimat* to the creation of the GDR utopia is convincing and valuable, one arguable shortcoming is that it fails to consider the integrity of the concept of *Heimat* to socialist ideology in general. For example, while Palmowski acknowledges that 'the socialist *Heimat* was ... ideologically defined by its ownership and by its forward-looking nature' and that it was about construction, change and utopia, the tendency to conflate *Heimat* exclusively with regionalism or even nationalism overlooks the inherently messianic and eschatological implications of *Heimat* as a permutation of Marx's Kingdom of Freedom. It is surprising in this context that Palmowski does not refer to the work of Ernst Bloch, whose philosophy was based on the insight that Marxism has both 'cold' and 'warm' streams inherent within it. The cold stream for Bloch represents the mechanistic, programmatic and economic approach characterised by Stalinism, while the warm stream represents the humanism, universalism and Messianism Bloch argues are also profoundly Marxist. *Heimat* is a central concept for Bloch: it represents both the open-ended utopian future and the Kingdom of Freedom of a classless society. Given that Bloch's work was extremely influential among GDR dissidents in the period to which Palmowski refers, it is

54. C.f. Elizabeth Boa and Rachel Palfreyman, *Heimat. A German Dream: Regional Loyalties and National identity in German Culture 1890-1990* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

55. Palmowski, 'Building an East German Nation', pp. 382-389.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 385.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 390.

surprising that he does not mention him in this context. Admittedly this may be because Palmowski is concerned with the exploitation of the concept of *Heimat* as a political and ideological tool by the SED, whose programmatic approach one may categorise along Blochian lines as belonging to the cold stream of Marxism. Nevertheless, based on Palmowski's astute observations, Bloch's philosophy deserves closer attention in this context.

By the end of the twentieth century, then, a complex process of secularisation had been underway in the East of Germany for over five hundred years. Far from being a simple movement from a highly religious society to a less religious one, this process had borne witness to the dynamics produced by interrelated religious and secular forces and interests. Narratives of home and homeland, either in religious or secular form, had played a central role in the processes of profound transformation observed during the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. The resulting situation in the region is that an atheistic worldview has become predominant, attached as it is to an identity that is the surplus of a past socialist 'utopia'. Furthermore, this 'worldview' is so encompassing and institutionalised that it has been compared to a religious confession in its own right. It is to Bloch's dialectical theory of secularisation that the discussion now turns, in an attempt to theorise the development and existence of East German folk atheism.

5. Conclusion: East German Folk Atheism as Utopia, Surplus and Critique

Traditional theories of secularisation have tended to focus on the movement from a religious society to a less religious one, or at the very least, as Charles Taylor puts it, 'from a society where a belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace'.⁵⁸ While the religious and social conflicts of Reformation-era Germany were no less about power, ideology and social organisation than open state campaigns against religion in the twentieth century, in the former period the existence of God was not fundamentally called into question. The contemporary debate about East German folk atheism certainly is based on the question of whether God exists and as such a process of secularisation can be seen to

58. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 3.

have been taking place. Today, only around 25% of the population of the Eastern German states identify themselves as religious. Of the 75% who do not, 50% explicitly identify themselves as atheist. What, then, is East German folk atheism? Is it a religion? A 'third confession' as Tiefensee suggests? Bloch 'turns on its head the old adage that Marxism and atheism are just modern forms of religious belief by maintaining that religious belief is actually a form of communism which was not yet ready or able to recognise or understand itself'.⁵⁹ If it is therefore at all possible to talk about East German folk atheism in terms of a 'confession', what is at stake and what becomes visible when we do so?

Historical analysis has demonstrated the way in which atheism was imposed on the GDR population. As Wohlrab-Sahr et al. have also shown in their empirical work, suppression was accompanied by the creation of an interpretative frame in which a rejection of religion acquired subjective plausibility. It is argued here that the refunctioning of the concept of *Heimat* can be seen to be at least as important in creating a communicative frame as, for example, the conflict between science and religion. *Heimat* itself has profoundly religious connotations alongside the connections with regional and national identities discussed by Palmowski, especially in light of Bloch's Marxist philosophy, of which *Heimat* is a central category. After Bloch left the GDR in 1961 on account of the incompatibility of his utopian Marxism with the dogmatism of the SED, his work was at the forefront of the student movement. The party undoubtedly manipulated the regional resonances of *Heimat* in order to create the GDR as a nation: *Heimat DDR*. However it clearly also understood its philosophical and specifically Marxist implications: as Palmowski points out, 'the emblem of the first German folklore festival depicted a dancing couple in stylized *Heimat* costumes in front of a building surrounded by scaffolding, whose decoration suggested that it was at the halfway point to completion (*Richtfest*).'⁶⁰ This image is exemplary of the regime's consistent depiction of the achievement of *Heimat* as something at the end of an active process of material transformation, which comes very close to Bloch's understanding.

In Blochian terms, then, the religious aspect of atheism under the SED consisted in the fact that it bound its adherents back to the state that created it, as

59. Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, p. xviii.

60. Palmowski, 'Building an East German Nation', p. 398.

well as the secular institutions through which it could be propagated and controlled. That *Heimat* was employed to facilitate the subjective plausibility of atheism as a belief system only highlights the contradictions inherent in the secularisation process, since *Heimat* can be seen to be at the root of GDR atheism while simultaneously expressing the Messianic – and Marxist – idea of human liberation. Today, East German folk atheism expresses still more contradictions. It now binds its adherents back to the entity that created it, the GDR itself, or ‘die unheimliche Heimat’ as Thompson has called it on account of the fact that ‘when it existed it really didn’t exist and now that it doesn’t exist, what it could have been does’.⁶¹ The phenomenon is utopian in that ‘East Germany’ no longer exists, and therefore an East German ‘people’ cannot logically exist, although the SED’s systematic efforts to create the image of Heimat GDR are just as much evidence that there never really was an East German ‘nation’ as the cries following the fall of the Berlin Wall of ‘Wir sind ein Volk!’. Nevertheless, the party enjoyed enough success in its creation of a socialist—and atheist—Heimat GDR that East German folk atheism survives as the cultural surplus of the GDR itself, both in the aspects of its rigorous, dogmatic, ‘cold stream’ ideology as well as its unrealised potential to bring about radical change. It is the unrealised nature of this potential that, after a Blochian reading, also contributes to the staying power of atheism, in addition to the idea that SED indoctrination was simply a job well done.

However, if Bloch’s insight that to be an atheist also means to resist the assumption of authority by church and state, what implications does this have for our consideration of East German atheism? If, as catholic sociologist Paul M. Zulehner suggests, ‘just as it’s normal to be a Catholic in Bavaria, in the East of Germany it’s normal to be an atheist’, then atheism can genuinely be seen as a marker of regional identity.⁶² In a political situation in which reunification has been acknowledged to be a process rather than a moment and in which explicit expressions of Eastern identity tend to be viewed as ‘ostalgic’ in a normative context dominated by Western narratives, can East German folk atheism also be seen to have critical potential? Why

61. Thompson, ‘Die unheimliche Heimat’, p. 280.

62. Quoted in Horst Groschopp, ‘Worum geht es in der Debatte über den “ostdeutscher Volksatheismus”?’ in *Kulturation*,(no. 1 2010). Available online at *Kulturation*: http://www.kulturation.de/ki_1_thema.php?id=127 [accessed 1 October 2011].

should it matter if East Germans are not ‘taking advantage’ en masse of the new religious ‘freedoms’ afforded to them since reunification? Does a refusal to return to religion not challenge the hegemony of notions of liberal pluralism, as well as frustrating the recruitment ambitions of both humanist groups and churches? The debate about atheism as a third confession, and in particular a Blochian interpretation of the phenomenon, is revelatory in two main ways: it can help us to break down the rigid distinctions between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ in order both to criticise patterns of hegemony past and present as well as to salvage the emancipatory, utopian content of both socialism and Christianity.