



Evangelical church in Brandenburg, German: *Mainstream culture of non-denominational people*

Society

Non-believing Trendsetters

How do non-believers differ from believers?

Atheists are educated, tolerant people, who know more about God, even though they do not believe in Him themselves.

Barry Kosmin is a market researcher of a somewhat different kind. The customers he researches are consumers of companies with names such as Lifechurch.tv or World Overcomers Christian Church™. The sociologist analyses souvenir shops, television programmes and church services offered by US churches.

However, above all Kosmin researches those groups of customers who are on strike and are not consumers of these religious products: the atheists. "The non-denominational group is the fastest growing segment on the world view market", says Kosmin. "Their numbers have doubled to 15 percent over the past 20 years in the USA."

The head of the "Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture" at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut belongs to the few scientists who have dedicated themselves to the study of secularism. Secularism includes groups such as atheists, agnostics, humanists and those who are religiously indifferent.

Worldwide, religionless people account for 15 percent of people (1 billion), in third place after Christians (around 2.3 billion people) and Muslims (1.6 billion people). However, surprisingly little is known about them: who are they, and what do they believe?

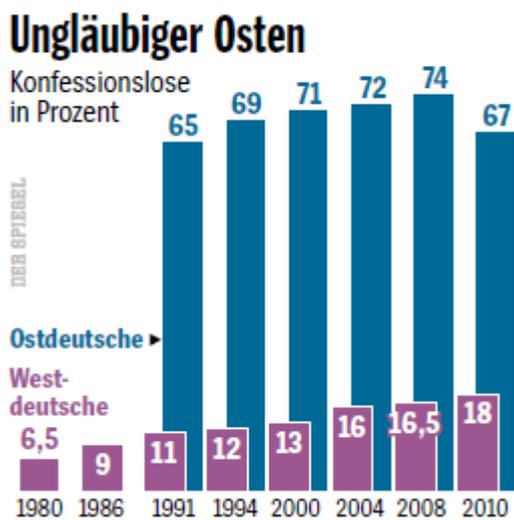
“Sometimes I feel like Christopher Columbus on an expedition to an unknown continent”, says Kosmin. “Many think, for example, that the population of the USA is becoming increasingly religious: but that is an optical illusion. Many Evangelicals have simply become more political and are trying to make themselves more heard.”

And this is also because the religious market is shrinking. In the USA, churches are losing up to one million members every year. In Europe, secularisation is even further advanced. In France, 40 percent of the population are religionless, believing in neither God nor a higher force. In Germany, this figure is around 27 percent.

The non-believing East Germany

Percentage of non-denominational people

Key: blue = East Germany, pink = West Germany



Source: General population survey for social sciences.

Until now, this theme was explored above all by religion-friendly scientists. The Vatican was a pioneer of the new research direction when it appointed a “Secretary for the Non-Believers” in 1965 to “penetrate the thinking of modern atheists” and understand “the reason for their spiritual confusion and renouncement of God”. Meanwhile, the theologians fear that even the churches are infiltrated by atheists. Three percent of Protestants admitted in a survey by the Evangelical Church in Germany that they did not believe in God. Many a churchman consoles themselves with the idea that God-questioning itself is an invention of the Christian Western World. However, even that is questionable: China, South Korea and Japan are some of the countries that least believe in God.

Now, secularisation researchers like Kosmin want to find out how sceptics differ from believers. Their initial findings are surprising: whereas previously religionlessness tended to be nurtured by educated, affluent, male city dwellers, the atheists are now moving into wider groups of society.

What do non-believers believe in? Sociologist Phil Zuckerman, who wants to introduce "Secular Studies" as a main subject at California's Pitzer College, emphasises that religionless people have strong value orientations: they are more against the death penalty, war and discrimination than the average. And they have fewer reservations against foreigners, homosexuals, oral sex and cannabis.

The most surprising finding is that atheists know more about God, in whom they do not believe, than the believers themselves. At least this was the result found by the Pew Center in 2010 from a survey carried out in the USA. Even when the most educated non-believers were discounted, non-believers were better informed when it came to questions on belief – followed by Jews and Mormons.

However, their religious knowledge is of no use to them: in the USA, non-believers rank way down on the popularity scale, below Muslims and gays. In South Carolina and Arkansas non-believers are not allowed to hold a public office position.

Unfortunately they do not have a powerful organisation behind them, like the believers. There is no typical non-believer, each society has its own secularism. Here, Germany is something like an historical experiment for sociologists, as it was neatly split into East and West. In the 20 years since reunification, a popular atheism of the third generation has formed within the former GDR. For a long time now, this is no longer a feature of the educated classes, but a mainstream culture.

Around 67 percent of East Germans are non-denominational, compared with 18 percent in the West. A trend reversal does not look likely: there is almost a one hundred percent probability that the children of non-denominational parents will also be non-denominational – the views of the mother are most influential.

With the end of the anti-church repression by the GDR regime, no re-Christianisation took place. Quite the opposite happened: "After the German reunification, people started leaving the church at an even faster rate", explains religious sociologist Detlef Pollack from the University of Münster.

Pollack says that it is the very proximity between the state and church that has contributed to the people leaving the church in the East: publicly funded theological chairs, military chaplaincy and church representatives in radio advice broadcasts has made religion perceived to be close to the government and coming from the West.

Germany also refutes the assumption that economic uncertainty makes people more religious, but the opposite seems to be the case: the oil crisis in the 70s, the period around the reunification of Germany and the current financial crisis have all seen waves of people leaving the church. Many ex-churchgoers say church tax was the reason for leaving.

Pollack believes that East Germany is a trendsetter and that one day more than 70 percent of the population will be non-denominational. However, he also believes that religion will never disappear entirely: "When churchgoers become the minority, the so-called diaspora effect comes into action, and the feeling of belonging in the dispersed communities starts to grow again."



Psychologist Caldwell-Harris: *"Many even see bad weather as fate"*

Catherine Caldwell-Harris from Boston University also sees this in a similar way. "There are simply two cognitive thinking styles in humans", says the psychologist. "Those who see a deeper meaning in everything and even see bad weather as fate. And those who are purely neurobiological and rather sceptical, who are not really made for or interested in believing."

She is currently testing her neuropsychological hypothesis using simple experiments: The test subjects watch a film in which triangles move around. The first group experience this film as a human drama, in which the large triangle attacks the small one. The other group describe quite mechanistically how the geometrical shapes move. Her hypothesis is that those who do not humanise the triangles tend to be more non-believing. "Both thinking styles have always existed", says Caldwell-Harris, "but in the past sceptics kept their mouths shut to avoid being burnt at the stake."

Only a tiny number of non-believers are as radical as the "strong atheists" such as Brit Richard Dawkins. The majority tend to be religiously indifferent or mildly agnostic, explains Kosmin. There are also secular humanists, free-thinkers and many other groups, says the sociologist: "One of the problems of atheism research is that we can't agree on common terminology. Each researcher coins his/her own terms."

Kosmin goes on to talk about a meeting of secular associations last year in Washington. They planned a large demonstration, "But they couldn't all agree on a motto. It was almost like something out of Monty Python." The march was cancelled. BY HILMAR SCHMUNDT