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Im Sog der Säkularisierung: Die deutschen Kirchen in Politik und Gesellschaft (1945-1990).

Thomas Brechenmacher. Berlin: be.bra verlag. 2021. 208 pp. €22.00 (hardback).

Decades after its fall, the Berlin Wall keeps separating historiographies of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). To a large extent, they continue to run on parallel tracks. Despite many methodological considerations and conceptual debates, in practice, the challenge remains of how to write the integrated history of a divided, yet in many ways connected, nation between 1945 and 1990, accounting for a large complex of interactions and entanglements, but also rejections, demarcations, and contrasts. The role of religion and churches is an obvious area that requires systematic exploration of German-German perspective. Church historians face a similar conceptual challenge: how to integrate two contrary though parallel processes – the successive alienation and organisational division of churches in the Federal Republic and the GDR on the one hand and their continuous cross-border solidarity, togetherness, and interconnections on the other. The latter is reflected in the understanding of German Protestantism as a ‘special East-West community’ and in the view of Catholicism as an ‘all-German bracket’ in the decades of division.

Thomas Brechenmacher’s new book *Im Sog der Säkularisierung: Die deutschen Kirchen in Politik und Gesellschaft (1945-1990)* provides an empirical response to these methodological challenges in presenting the entangled church history of divided Germany. Focusing on the interaction between religion, politics and society, Brechenmacher explores the role and influence of both Christian communities – the Roman Catholic Church and Catholicism on the one hand and Evangelical Churches and Protestantism on the other – for and in the

politics and societies of two German states from the collapse of the Third Reich over the establishment of the Federal Republic and the GDR in 1949 to the reunification of 1989/90.

The central themes tackled within ten chapters include coming to terms with the legacy of the Third Reich and post-war realignment; the position of churches in constitution; the evolution of church-state relations between cooperation and confrontation; religion in school; churches' responses to the social changes of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s; the contribution of churches to the political and social debates on issues of marriage, family and sexuality; the churches' engagement with the questions of peace, war and rearmament; cross-border church contacts, institutional entanglements and financial transfers; and the role of churches in the Peaceful Revolution and in the process of German reunification. The concluding section offers an overview of the churches in united Germany and its 'post-secular' society. Brechenmacher places particular emphasis on the churches' cross-border relations and entanglements while accounting for growing distinctions and parallel developments.

Some basic East-West differences have been outlined in the introduction, the first of which refers to church membership statistics. Although in 1950 about 96.5 percent of all Germans belonged formally to one of two Christian denominations, four decades later more than two thirds of the GDR population had no religious affiliation, whereas 84 percent of Germans in the Federal Republic remained church members in 1989. Drawing on the so-called Church articles of the Weimar *Reichsverfassung* 1919, both the *Grundgesetz* (Basic Law) of the Federal Republic and the GDR Constitution of 1949 guaranteed a unique position and rights to religion and churches in their respective states and societies. Yet different political contexts resulted in varying state-church relations, constitutional realities and separated life-worlds.

The churches in the pluralist Federal Republic have never experienced an existential threat from the state. For them, it was rather a matter of enforcement of their claims and later the struggle to be part of political and public debates. The primary concern for the churches in the GDR, on the contrary, was self-assertion, which initially was a matter of survival in and later co-existence with the socialist state. Even though the churches in East and West Germanies remained united in dogmatic and theological respects, they had to operate in increasingly separated life-worlds. The unity of the nation was never their main concern, argues Brechenmacher. The organisational split of churches by the Iron Curtain was formal for the Evangelical churches from 1969 and factual for the Catholics from 1976.

Both denominations developed different survival strategies and understandings of their place in the socialist state. While the Evangelical churches criticised the ‘stubborn separatism’ of the Catholic church, whose attitude towards the SED-state Brechenmacher describes as consequently distant, the Catholics, on the contrary, were suspicious about the ‘too close relationship to the state’ of the East German Protestants. Despite rather critical appraisal of the attempts of the Evangelical Churches in the GDR (BEK) to abandon the ground of confrontation and find a constructive way to operate in the socialist state, Brechenmacher eventually argues that even under these difficult circumstances the churches managed to provide space that allowed for the creation of a counter-public and dissent, particularly in the 1980s.

An important leitmotif of Brechenmacher’s book, as the title suggests, is advancing secularisation. Both German states were affected by this Western modern tendency in terms of separation between state and church, decline of faith and the treatment of religion as one

option among many. The repercussion of this process in two fundamentally different systems varied greatly though. In the GDR, secularisation was actively pursued for ideological reasons in the sense of the politics of ‘deconfessionalisation’, in line with the principles of Marxism-Leninism and with the final goal of the dying out of religion. In the pluralist Federal Republic, churches’ voices remained a pronounced part of the public discourse despite the steady decline of their authority and the process of *Entkirchlichung* increasing alienation from the church. These challenges, but also systemic East-West differences, are exemplified by the state-church disputes and conflicts over the issues of school and youth. For both Christian communities in the Federal Republic the matter of denominational religious education in public schools became a serious test of their adaptability and their will to change in line with the major social transformations. At the same time, these often-vehement debates were taking place on the basis of mutual cooperation and within the constitutionally embedded Christian framework.

The fundamental conflict between the SED-state and Christian churches in the GDR is illustrated by the attacks on the *Junge Gemeinde* (evangelical youth within a church community) and the enforcement of *Jugendweihe* (socialist youth dedication ceremony introduced in 1954) as a secular alternative to the Christian sacrament of confirmation/communion. This development together with removal of religious education from public schools contributed to rapid *Entkirchlichung*, disengagement from the church, in East German society. The prestige of Evangelical churches increased considerably due to their significant role in the Peaceful Revolution of 1989. Nonetheless, Brechenmacher concludes, the hopes for a renaissance of Protestantism after the ‘church reunification’ have not been fulfilled because the five states of the former GDR, the heartland of Protestantism,

when joining the allegedly ‘catholic’ Federal Republic, were already a largely deconfessionalised, secularised region.

The book demonstrates convincingly that conceptually, secularisation as an overarching pattern of interpretation proves to be effective for a German-German perspective in two respects. Firstly, it enables the integration of the period into the *longue durée* of German national history. Secondly, it allows to avoid contrasting the success story of the West German churches with a story of failure on the part of the East German churches. Overall, *Im Sog der Säkularisierung* is a methodologically ambitious book that offers a substantial, well contextualised and thought-provoking survey of post-war German church history.

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