

Article

Family as an Arena for Religious Socialisation in a Secular Environment—Enabling Conditions and Paths of Transmission in East Germany

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Abstract

For decades, research has provided consistent findings on the decline in the importance of religion in Western societies. The question is how religiosity is reproduced against this backdrop. This study assumes that religious socialisation takes place primarily as family socialisation. The aim of this article is to gain a more precise understanding of this process. To this end, it reconstructs the transmission of Christian faith in three-generation families in East Germany. The sample comprises 15 three-generation families from different social backgrounds and world views. In order to ensure the validity of the findings, a triangulation of the following qualitative investigation methods was carried out: individual interviews, photo documentation and family discussions. As a result, three forms of positive transmission of religious influences across several family generations are presented typologically: transmission with hardly any change, declining religiosity and intensified religiosity in the youngest generation. It becomes apparent that the more indifferent religion appears to the individual, the more difficult it becomes to transmit religious attitudes. Complementary to this, however, it also becomes apparent that transmission is particularly sustainable in terms of socialisation when it is combined with openness to the social environment. The lack of religious resonance areas in society can lead to an intentional dynamisation of the transmission processes. Using quantitative data, the thesis is put forward that religious socialisation paths are more diverse in East Germany than in West Germany, where transmission still tends to follow traditional patterns.

Keywords: religious change; value change; family research; East Germany; intergenerational change; secularisation



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1. Introduction

Everything begins with the family. It is the social place where we gain important experiences about ourselves, about other people, about the world. It is also usually within the family that people come into contact with the Christian religion, traditionally through the baptism of a child. For a long time, the socialising power of Christianity stemmed, among other things, from the fact that the Christian faith was anchored in family life in many different ways. Conversely, family was shaped and normalised by religious rituals such as celebrations marking the rites of passage in life. With regard to the sacrament of marriage in the Catholic Church, it could even be said that it was only through a ritually performed marriage that family was religiously established. Today, however, marriage and family have largely lost their sacramental foundation. Marriage, which was already

a “worldly matter” for the reformer Martin Luther,¹ has become an administrative act under civil law. Meanwhile, less than 20 percent of all marriages in Germany involve a Catholic or Protestant wedding ceremony.² Nevertheless, the religious characterisation of family has not simply disappeared. Church rituals still play an important role in many families at life transitions, even when their members consider them-selves less and less religious.³ But how is it that some families maintain their religious and church ties and pass them on to their children and grandchildren, while in other families this is increasingly no longer the case? We still know little about how this development takes place in either case and which factors are decisive in this process. These questions were the impetus for the project “Religiosity in East Germany. Families as contexts of transmission, interruption and reconstitution”.⁴ The answers are intended to contribute to clarifying the reasons for the decline in the importance of the church and Christian religiosity in East Germany and beyond. Put positively, this raises the question of the conditions that enable family and church-mediated religiosity to mutually reinforce each other.

2. Method and Context

2.1. Research Question and Aims of the Study

Family is an essential arena for human socialisation, where values and cultural practices are learned, become firmly anchored within us, and are passed on to children and grandchildren, partly unconsciously but also quite deliberately. Since religion is part of these attitudes and behaviour patterns passed down through families, it is particularly interesting to see which family constellations contribute to people orienting themselves towards certain norms and world views or changing and reconfiguring existing family values. In research, the decline in the importance of religion is interpreted both as a consequence of individual changes in attitudes towards religion, which increasingly lead to people leaving the church, and as a long-term generational effect.

Figure 1 shows that church membership in East Germany is declining by an average of 5–10 percent every 10 years. This does not require people to leave the church.⁵ It is sufficient that parents no longer have their children baptised and that irreligiousness has a socialising effect on their part. In order to gain a more precise understanding of this process, this article deals with the religious socialisation of people in the family over at least three family generations. In this way, the following issues relevant to the familial transmission of religiosity are examined:

- What specific references to religion can be found in the everyday life of families?
- How are corresponding orientations and cultural influences anchored in the everyday life of families? How does the interaction between the explicit level of action (e.g., rules in education) and the more implicit level of patterns of action embedded in everyday life (e.g., exemplifying religious beliefs) take place?
- Who are the relevant socialisation agents? What is their effectiveness based on? Which role models are relevant here? Do the respective socialisation agents have a specific influence on different dimensions of religion?
- How are intergenerational relationships shaped in relation to normative (religious) structures of meaning? Specifically: what influence do parenting styles, (grand)parent–child interactions and ideological plurality within the family have on internal family communication and the integration of its members? Are there differences between religious and non-religious families?
- What influence do socio-structural factors (income, level of education, social mobility) and milieu-specific factors (lifestyle, orientation towards values) have on the transmission of religious orientations?

- How are internal and external family issues and requirements negotiated within the family? How are conflicts that arise in this context integrated? Is contingency permitted? To what extent is the family pre-determined by the social structure, and to what extent is it able to develop an independent attitude towards itself and its environment?
- What strategies do Christian families develop in their culturally and ideologically minority position in order to pass on their faith? Does the diaspora situation in East Germany only have negative influences on the transmission of family religiosity, or does it also have positive effects on religion?

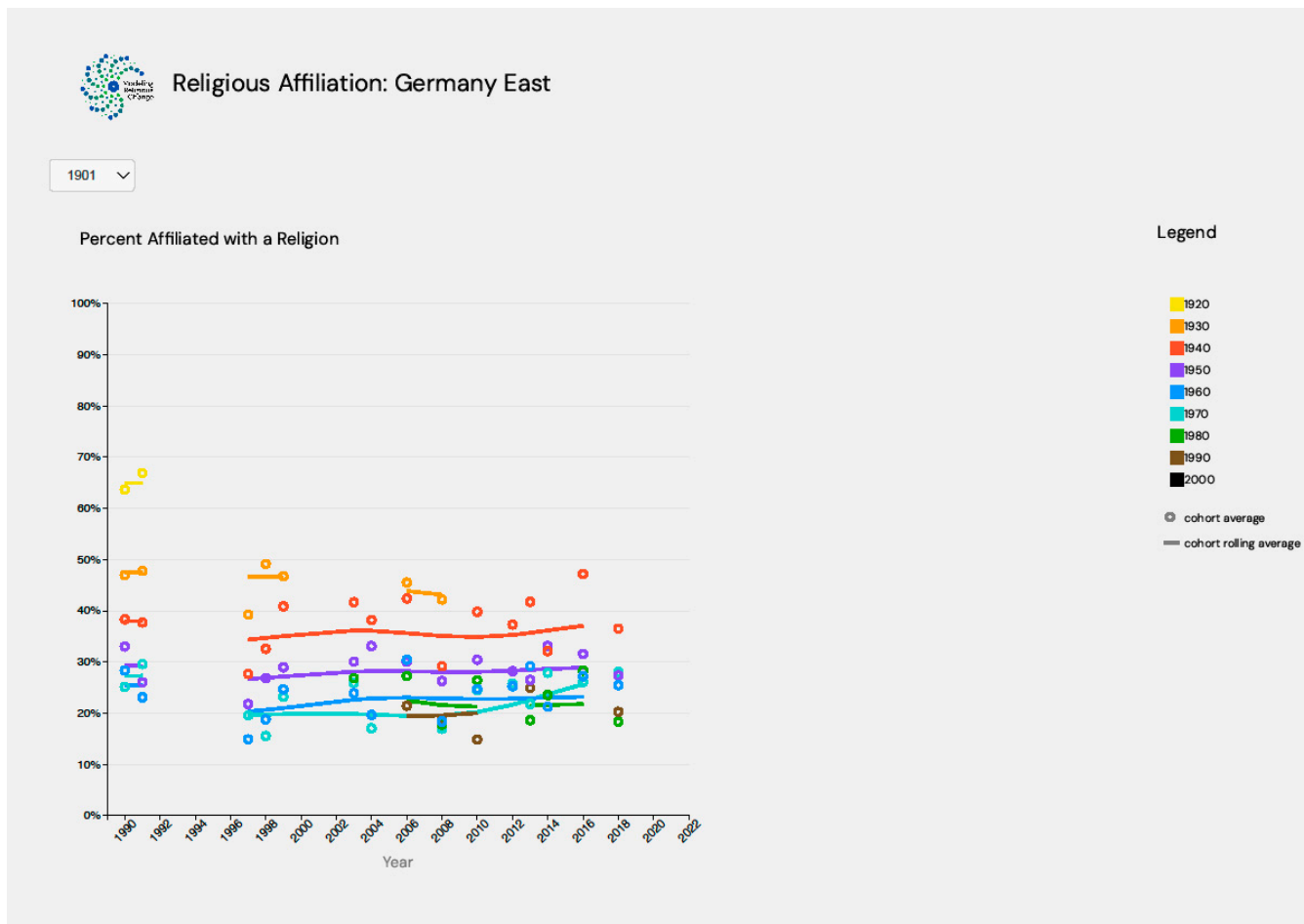


Figure 1. Religious affiliation in East Germany. Source: Bacon, Rachel J. "Cohort Patterns in DIM-R."⁶.

2.2. The Secular Context of East Germany

The social context of East Germany poses a double challenge for Christians and churches. On the one hand, they are participating in the decline in religious practice and church ties that is typical for Europe, as well as the privatisation of religious beliefs, which is further reinforced by increasing rationalisation, scientification and pluralisation of lifestyles in the course of the functional differentiation of society (cf. Pollack and Rosta 2025). Furthermore, East German society is also characterised by the legacy of anti-religious and anti-church policies during the SED dictatorship, a legacy that today has a socialising effect (ibid.; Elm et al. 2025). After the Second World War, at the beginning of the division of Germany, more than 90 percent of the population in both East and West Germany belonged to one of the two major Christian churches (Pollack and Rosta 2025, p. 317). At the time of the collapse of the GDR, the proportion of religious believers in West Germany was

still around 85 percent, while in the East it had fallen to just under 30 percent (ibid.). Assumptions that the end of the SED dictatorship, which was hostile to religion and the church, would lead to a renewed interest in religion and the church among the population did not turn out to be true (Wunder 2024, p. 193). On the contrary, both the decline in church membership and the decline in individual religiosity continued. In 2022, 43 percent of the population in Germany no longer belonged to any religious association (Wunder et al. 2023, p. 8). There has also been a decline in other factors relevant to measuring religiosity and faith: the baptism rate (Jacobi 2024, p. 212), religious self-assessment (Wunder et al. 2023, p. 26) and belief in God.⁷ Accordingly, the authors of the current church membership survey state: “We are currently facing not only a crisis in the church, but also a tangible crisis in the Christian faith in its traditional form. And there is much to suggest that the crisis in the church is based on this crisis of faith and is exacerbating the former” (Pollack et al. 2024, p. 142, translation by the author).

2.3. Familial and Institutional Socialisation Factors and Their Placement in International Religious Studies

The highly secularised social context in East Germany therefore poses a particular challenge for the transmission of faith within families. Current findings on the socialisation of faith within families paint a rather controversial picture. In their analysis of the 6th Church Membership Survey (KMU 6), a group of authors led by Wolfgang Ilg points to the enduring importance of the family for religious socialisation (Ilg et al. 2024), but argue that church-based agents of socialisation, such as confirmation, are more important (ibid., p. 364). My analysis of socialisation-related findings from KMU 6 classifies the high relevance attributed to confirmation within a broader process of religious socialisation, according to which secondary institutional socialisation factors always interact with primary family socialisation (Findeis 2023, p. 425). The findings of Gärtner, Hennig and Müller, based on an extensive mixed-methods study, also highlight the significant socialising influence of the family, especially mothers, in the transmission of faith (Gärtner et al. 2025, p. 46).⁸ The study by Stolz et al. (2024), based on longitudinal data from the Socio-Economic Panel, attempts to explain the decline in religiosity across birth cohorts over a period of 80 years using a single indicator, church attendance in West Germany (Stolz et al. 2024). Although they confirm the findings from other studies that each birth cohort is less religious than the previous one (ibid., p. 809),⁹ they are unable to provide an empirically saturated answer to the question of why parents do not fully pass on their faith to their children. Neither religious nor non-religious predictors can explain the decline in church attendance among younger cohorts (ibid., p. 825).¹⁰

In addition to the aforementioned international comparative study involving Germany, Italy, Hungary, Finland, and Canada, published by Gärtner et al. (2025) there are also studies from the USA on religious family socialisation. In their long-term study, Bengtson et al. (2018) conclude that socialisation factors, especially socialisation within the family, are decisive for the increase in non-religious worldviews. Compared to previous generations, there has been an increase in families in which non-religious worldviews are successfully passed on to the next generation (ibid., p. 270). This means that non-religious worldviews have a socializing effect that goes beyond the abandonment of religion. When non-religiousness becomes the norm in the family environment, this has a self-reinforcing effect on the transmission of non-religious worldviews. We have been dealing with this expectation of normality in many regions of East Germany for decades. Christian Smith (2025) also takes a generation-specific approach to his current study of the development of traditional Christian religion in the US, conducting over 200 interviews and combining these with group interviews, a representative survey, and secondary analyses of other surveys. In his wide-ranging analysis, which combines socio-structural and cultural-sociological aspects,

he also comes to the conclusion that religion is not useless, but outdated and increasingly superfluous. Smith explains the decline of Christian religion with a comprehensive cultural change and a new zeitgeist. He refers primarily to the USA, but his findings are likely to be relevant for Europe as well. Smith sees the new zeitgeist, which is attributed primarily to millennials, as being characterised by expressive individualism, acceptance of cultural and ethnic diversity, and cognitive relativism (ibid., pp. 10et seqq.). Added to this are the effects of an education system that teaches that all religious and cultural offerings are equally acceptable and that particular ideas are simply implausible. Multiculturalism prevails over the truth claims of traditional Christian religion, without this being an intended goal (ibid., p. 163f.).¹¹ Nevertheless, Smith attempts to modify the secularization theory paradigm¹² by interpreting the increase in spiritualism and occultism he has observed as a way of filling the vacuum created by the decline of Christian religion (ibid., p. 116). Based on a broad range of data, Smith refutes the widespread assumption that the social significance of religion and religiosity in the US contrasts with that in Europe.¹³ On the other hand, he argues in a direction that has dominated the sociological debate on religion in German-speaking countries for years. In her latest analysis of recent trends in research on religion and the secular in German-speaking countries, [Monika Wohlrab-Sahr \(2026\)](#) argues for a shift in the locus of religion from the level of individual religiosity to collective public religiosity. Based on the paradigmatic debate between secularisation and individualisation, she discusses problems in research on religion and national identity as well as on secular-religious disputes in court, in public debates, or in online media (ibid.). In this context, she refers to conflicts over contradictory normativities and their relationship to the religious and the secular, as well as to attempts to draw boundaries between them (ibid.).

The question of interest in the following is what impact these dynamics have on the religious socialisation power of families.

2.4. Research Approach and Empirical Procedures

Since religious socialisation processes are rarely based on conscious decisions that can be directly determined by questions, but rather follow latent, habitual patterns of meaning (cf. [Bourdieu 2015](#), p. 127), we have chosen a largely open setting designed to reconstruct the contexts that interest us. Three factors were relevant for the composition of our sample: In order to understand the communication patterns that are important for the transmission of religion between different family generations, the participation of three generations from each family was essential. The representatives of the grandchild generation should be aged 14 and above and, if possible, younger than 30, i.e., in the phase of adolescent redefinition of their relationship to their family of origin and thus able to make independent decisions about further education and career paths, choice of partner, religion, etc.¹⁴ The inclusion of grandparents was based on the assumption that they would act as guardians of family tradition and thus ensure consistent transmission logics. In the interviews and a social data questionnaire that we presented to all interviewees, grandparents often told us about their experiences with their parents and grandparents, providing a perspective spanning up to five family generations.¹⁵

Secondly, we assumed that the degree of denominational and ideological homogeneity or disparity within a family has an impact on its ability to pass on religious attitudes to children and grandchildren. In this respect, we structured our sample according to an ideological–religious matrix, starting with religiously homogeneous Protestant or Catholic families, moving on to mixed-religious and Protestant/non-religious or Catholic/non-religious families, and ending with completely non-religious families at the grandparents' and/or parents' level. One of those families explicitly considered itself critical towards religion.

A third selection criterion, whose influence on the processes of transmitting normative attitudes we had to take into account, is primarily socio-structural in nature and focuses on aspects of socio-economic status such as formal education, income, or social mobility, as well as milieu-specific factors such as lifestyle and sociocultural aspects, such as the embedding of one's life in an urbanised secular or more traditional religious rural environment, as is still found in some areas of East Germany.¹⁶

Sampling and data analysis were carried out in a closely linked circular process of sampling, data analysis, and theory development in line with grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss 2010). In order to represent the complexity of our research question as broadly as possible, we combined several survey methods in the spirit of methodological triangulation. The aim was to evaluate the data obtained using different methods, check their plausibility, highlight any contradictions and, overall, ensure the validity of our findings. Above all, we had to focus on gaining the trust of our interviewees so that they would be open to our intentions and not just give socially preferred answers or answers that corresponded exclusively to their individual self-image. Ultimately, we were interested in the entire family in its respective uniqueness and not just individual gatekeepers.

In a first step, we interviewed one representative of each family generation individually, based on the same guidelines for all three generations. In some families, we also interviewed several representatives of one generation, such as the mother and father if the parents were separated, but occasionally also both grandparents or several siblings if this seemed appropriate to us after preliminary discussions. In principle, we conducted the interviews at the same time as far as possible in order to prevent generation-specific perspectives on the topics of interest to us from being levelled out in advance through mutual exchange about the content of the interviews.

The guide for the individual interviews began with the question of how our interviewees had spent last Christmas, a question that was easy for both religious and non-religious people to relate to. Further questions related to the everyday life of the family, which topics and activities are important to its members, and which generation-specific perspectives play a role. The answer given by a granddaughter to the question of what had been important to her grandparents in terms of providing her with guidance on her path through life gives an impression of the intergenerational exchange processes that are at the centre of our research interest. The question is to what extent certain transmission processes were intentional and whether those involved are aware of them as such. And, of course, we can also compare the granddaughter's statement with those of her parents and grandparents. We only addressed the topic of religion and the church in a later part of these conversations, assuming that religious meanings are primarily implicit and that the religious implications of their actions are only partially available to the subjects as retrievable knowledge. At the end of the individual interviews, each interviewee was given a disposable camera and asked to take photos over the next 3–4 months that document scenes from family life that answer the question "What is typical of our family?" This gave the subjects a participatory role in which they actively influenced which areas of their family life were made available to our research. The photos provided a stage on which the subjects could present themselves as they wanted to be seen, independently of the suggestiveness of the interviewer's questions. Furthermore, the disposable cameras that the participants sent back to us not only created technically equal conditions for all interviewees, but also generated suspense, as they could only view the photos they had taken during the subsequent family discussion.

In our third empirical approach, the photos then formed the starting point for a moderated family discussion. In addition to the people who had already participated in the individual interviews, other family members also took part, e.g., other children, grandchildren or the second line of grandparents. In this way, the family field was supplemented

by further perspectives. Unlike the individual interviews, no guidelines applicable to all families were used in the family discussions. Instead, the topics resulting from the analysis of the individual interviews and photos were brought into the family discussion. To begin with, we presented the families with a selection of 10–15 photos and asked the participants to comment on them spontaneously. The photos thus provided an everyday point of crystallisation for low-threshold communication on the challenging topic of religion. At the same time, we expected that the unusual nature of the communication situation could best be made more fluid by referring to specific events chosen by the participants themselves, so that a realistic intergenerational exchange would be possible. In some cases, where particular family tensions were to be expected, for example because the parents were separated, we let the participants play a round of Uno at the beginning. Of particular interest in the family discussions, which were designed as group discussions, was the close observation of how communication on value- and religion-related topics takes place in detail in a multi-generational family setting.

2.5. Description of the Sample and Problems in Accessing the Field

Our sample consists of 15 families spread across the five eastern German states and East Berlin (see Figure 2):¹⁷ we conducted a total of 65 individual interviews and family discussions.

Before deciding to include a family in our sample, we often held several preliminary discussions, mostly by telephone, but sometimes also communicated with potential participants via digital platforms.

After receiving several expressions of interest from families with mostly greater degrees of connection to the church at the start of the project, prompted by a number of press reports in regional newspapers, and interviewing some of them, the subsequent criteria-based recruitment of participants proved to be extremely difficult. We initially focused on our general interest in the everyday lives of today's families and the associated value formation processes when talking to multipliers and potential probands, without addressing our narrower focus on the transmission of religiosity. This strategy was virtually unsuccessful. One factor that played a role was that we initially wrote to a large number of associations, organisations and interest groups in all five eastern German states and East-Berlin. These included, for example, rural women's associations, carnival clubs in smaller towns, dog training schools, volunteer fire brigades, farmers' associations and football clubs. Of course, we also established contact with church congregations, superintendents' offices, church choirs and diaconal institutions, as well as with decidedly non-religious associations such as youth initiation associations (Jugendweihvereine) and regional associations of the Humanist Association of Germany (Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands, HVD). These contacts have already provided us with important insights into the field of research, which will only be outlined here:

Outside of church institutions, there was mostly skepticism, even outright rejection, of our request to talk to families about their everyday lives. Although Germans' trust in scientific institutions is very high compared to other social institutions¹⁸ and there are no serious differences between West and East Germans in terms of trust in science,¹⁹ we nevertheless encountered a remarkable reserve among potential participants and multipliers when it became apparent that our interest in East German families, their traditions and values was embedded in a publicly funded university research project. It should be noted here that a significant minority of East Germans who are critical of the Western institutional system and inclined towards political populism still often see themselves as victims of public discrediting by the press, radio and television (Pollack 2020). We had the impression that, as representatives of a state university, we were being associated with a populist view

in which public institutions are generally assumed to have a Western hegemonic monopoly on interpretation that is inherently incapable of grasping and adequately reflecting the reality of life in East Germany. Older East Germans also had long-term consequences of their experiences with state institutions in the GDR. This was evident, for example, in the fact that our interview request in a private family context was compared by an older person who was initially interested in our topic to the 'Stasi methods' of the SED secret service. In most cases, however, if we received any feedback at all, refusals were justified by a lack of time or by the fact that not all generations of the family were willing to be interviewed. The fact that our stated interest in 'values in families' was often incomprehensible to them may also have played a role here. We also had this experience in our first interviews. Above all, however, preliminary discussions with people who had initially shown interest revealed reluctance and alienation towards the topics of religion and the church. Despite all our efforts to establish low-threshold contact with the families, we were unable to hide the fact that we were from a department of theology when it came down to it in the preliminary discussions. Finally, it also played a role that we reached fewer people through unknown multipliers in the respective areas we contacted than through intermediaries in our personal networks. It was easier to gain access to a family in Mecklenburg that was even critical of religion through a friend of a friend than through an anonymous enquiry via the Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania Country Women's Association. On the other hand, press reports in regional newspapers and reposts from our Instagram account by far-reaching journalists and politicians with affinity to East Germany also led to families contacting us on their own initiative in several cases. In the church sector, on the other hand, we encountered mostly openness and interest in supporting our work. But even here, pastors encountered reservations when they approached families in their congregations about participating in our project. Our impression was often that family is a sphere shielded from the intrusions of society, especially when it comes to personal issues. Overall, our recruitment experiences reflect a great deal of skepticism towards society and its media self-exploration organs.

The following experience stands out: unlike the older members of the grandparent generation, who had been socialised in the GDR, it was mainly younger people from the parent and grandchild generations who responded to posts on our Instagram channel. We also encountered greater openness to our cause among these younger people. With one exception, our sample meets the criterion of three generations. On the religious-denominational matrix, we have a range from denominational homogeneous evangelical regional church and free church families in all three generations to mixed-denominational families to two non-religious families, one of which is close to the religiously critical Humanist Association.²⁰ With regard to our third selection criterion of socio-structural and milieu-specific predisposition, a concentration in the middle class can be observed. In the majority of families, higher educational aspirations are the agenda. At least one parent has usually completed a university degree, and the children generally attend a high school or are already studying. However, even in these families, there are sometimes members who have not completed an academic education and whose relationship to the topics we are interested in is determined by their life circumstances in a different way than that of people who also reflect intellectually on life-oriented questions and have a corresponding level of literacy. In terms of their economic situation, lifestyle, social mobility and social milieu, we see a wide range from one family with a household income of €20,000 per month to two families in the range of the state-set minimum income. Our sample also includes families in which three generations live and, in some cases, work in close proximity to one another, as well as families in which all three generations live in cities several hundred kilometers apart. The social environment of the families also varies greatly. We have urban families in

a highly secularised environment with less than 10 percent of the population belonging to the church, and traditionally rural areas with over 50 percent of the population belonging to the church. All of this naturally has an impact on a family's internal mindset and its attitude towards its social environment.

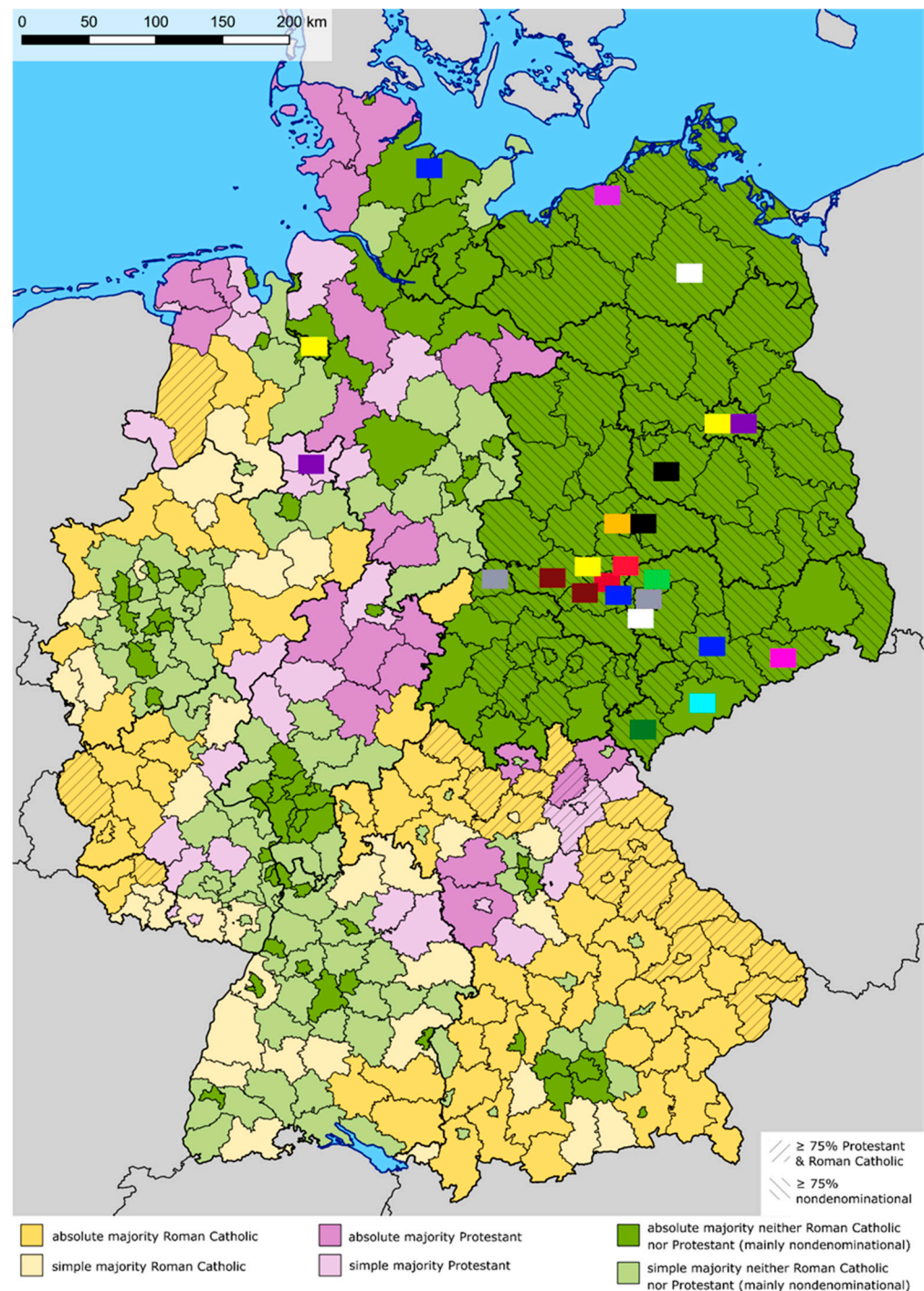


Figure 2. Distribution of families across East Germany. The colours of the squares represent each family. The generations of the families are spread across different locations. Source: own illustration based on [Wikimedia \(2024\)](#).

It should also be noted that there is multiple social bias: if the participation of several family generations is made a prerequisite for a study, all those who are not integrated into such a family context and who therefore cannot benefit from family-specific resources, i.e., single persons, single-parent families with children, etc., are excluded. Nor do we

reach families whose internal communication does not allow for such a survey. In our case, this is likely to be an important exclusion criterion. Overall, our sample contains roughly equal numbers of well-educated, middle-class families and lower-middle-class families. Families with limited resources and precarious social status, on the other hand, are underrepresented. However, such families are generally difficult to reach for social science surveys.

3. Results

3.1. Evaluation and Analysis Framework

We evaluated our data using the following steps: An observation report was written shortly after each interview. The interviews were mostly transcribed in entirety and progress reports were created. Interpretation reports were created from the interpretation sessions, which were also recorded. The interpretation was initially carried out using sequence analysis,²¹ generally focusing on the following sets of questions: firstly, the initial question ‘How did you spend last Christmas?’, secondly, significant points relating to the family connection of the person concerned, and thirdly, religious references in the respective interview. We took a similar approach when evaluating the family discussions. During the first 1.5 years of the project, we held an approximately three-hour interpretation session for each of these three points, so that each individual interview was comprehensively analysed by the research team in three sessions with regard to the questions of interest to us. Later, we shortened this process by holding only one or two interpretation sessions per person in the entire team, with individual staff members then continuing to interpret the respective interviews on their own and preparing corresponding interpretation protocols. In addition, ad hoc memos were created. The next level of analyses are family portraits, which were created after interpreting all individual interviews and family discussions based on the respective interpretation protocols.

Some of these systematically condensed family portraits also incorporate analyses of the photographs of the respective participants, developed using Grounded Theory methodology. The photo analysis initially served to broaden the perspective in reconstructing the normative transmission processes. Photos open up a different horizon of interpretation than individual interviews and group discussions. They do not aim at linguistically reflexive meanings or collective negotiation processes, but rather focus on visual forms of expression, which in turn allow conclusions to be drawn about family narratives and their social references. Individual interviews, group discussions within the family and photos taken by the interviewees themselves activate their own modes of communication and thus reveal different dimensions of family communication in their internal and external relationships. This methodological triangulation made it possible to review the findings of the interview interpretation, to expand or confirm them where necessary, and thus to increase the overall validity of our results.²²

In general, two independent dimensions of investigation were decisive for our analytical work. On the one hand, we looked at the ability of families to develop something like an independent normative orientation. I demonstrate this using a heuristic representation of the relationship between internal family communication and external social orientation (Section 3.2). Secondly, I address the question of how familial religious patterns are passed on across several family generations and, in the process, updated and changed (Section 3.3).

3.2. The Relationship Between Internal Family Communication and the Family's External Social Orientation

We have focused more than originally anticipated on the internal dynamics of the respective families. This was essential in order to identify the characteristics in which the

values and patterns of meaning that interest us find expression. We refer to these habitual styles and shared beliefs as the *internal orientation* of a family. Understanding a family's internal orientation is key to determining the extent of its operational independence from the primary structural differentiation of society and thus to describing the socialising power of the family. At the same time, this internal orientation, which means more than mere introspection, cannot be viewed independently of its external social orientation. *External orientation* entails a number of functional requirements for family members, each of which presents opportunities and risks. We distinguish between internal orientation on a continuum from cohesive to disparate (Figure 3a, vertical axis). Added to this is the external orientation of a family, which—here on the horizontal axis—ranges from closed to open.

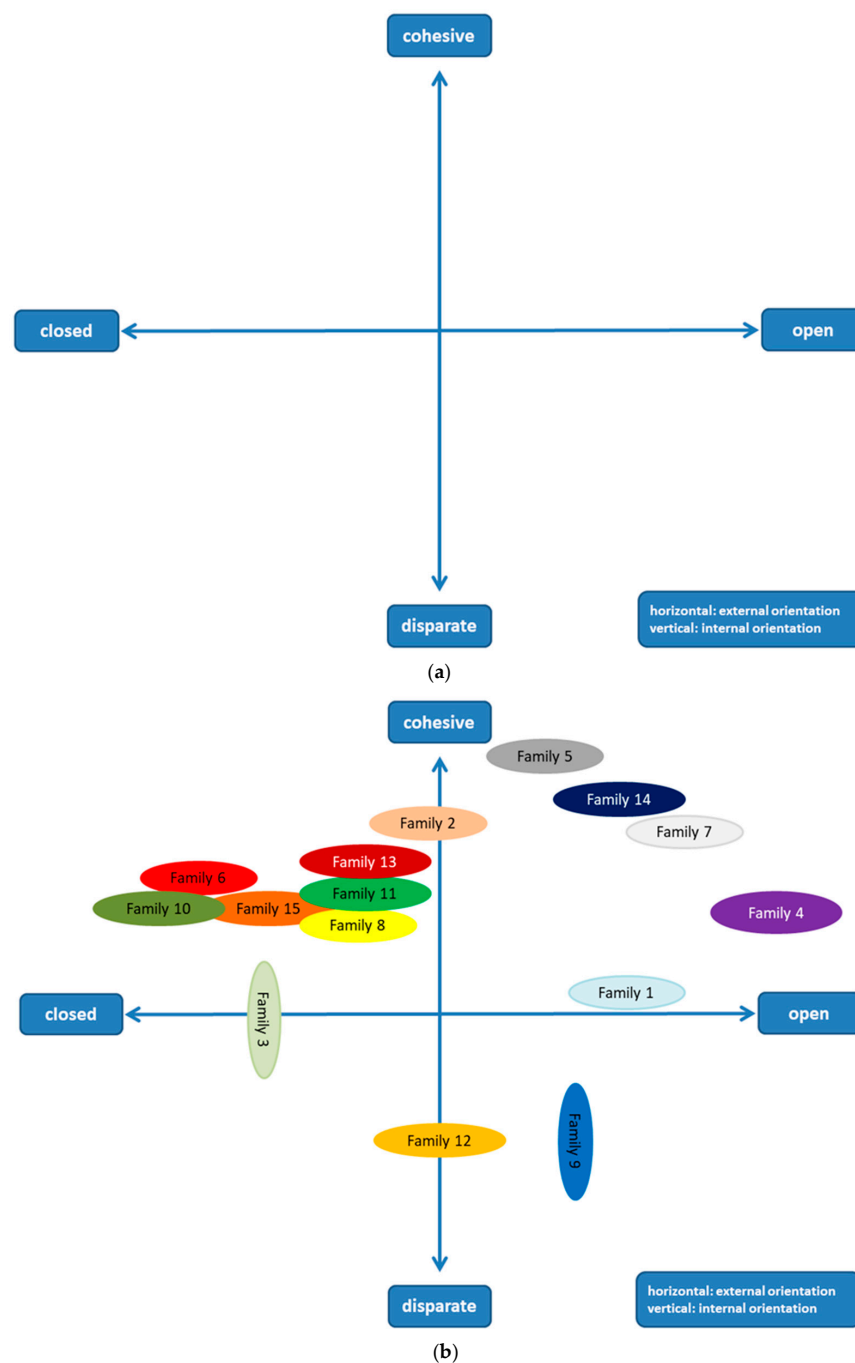


Figure 3. (a) Internal orientation and external orientation of families. Source: own illustration. (b) Internal orientation and external orientation of the sample. Source: own illustration.

An outward orientation can be understood as a family being open to the normative positions of its environment. We speak of a closed outward orientation when the family tends to distance itself from its environment and, in line with its normative inward orientation, is very selective in its interactions with its environment. Nevertheless, every family is embedded in an environment. In this respect, external relationships describe how families are embedded in their environment.

The interaction of both orientations theoretically results in four constellations (Figure 3b). However, only two are empirically relevant: cohesive internal orientation with closed or open external orientation. This is due to the aforementioned bias, whereby families with high communicative disparity tend to participate in such studies only rarely.

In general, determining the balance between internal and external orientation involves two questions: How much effort do families need to invest in order to maintain communication between external expectations and internal preferences, and how does this balance influence families' ability to pass on their family-specific orientations from one generation to the next? In general, it can be said that internally cohesive families, whether they have a closed or open external orientation, are able to pass on their religious attitudes and worldviews to subsequent generations. Families that are less open to their social environment can maintain their normative internal orientation, but this tends to make their internal orientation less dynamic, which narrows the scope for autonomy of their members and makes internal integration of the family more difficult. In these cases, beliefs and worldviews tend to be passed on in an instructive and authoritative manner. Their mindset is characterised by strong internal cohesion and high expectations of loyalty from their members, as well as ideas of order and a need for control. If, on the other hand, a family has diverse connections to its surroundings and is therefore open to its social environment, this increases the complexity of its world views. The normative internal orientation of the family can thus recede into the background or even fade beyond recognition. However, it can also be updated and reemphasised. Unlike in socially closed families, contingency and thus opportunities for development are permitted in these cases. The mindset of such families tends to be geared towards growth and individual development. It is not uncommon for these families to be characterised by a strong work ethic. Recognition within the family is achieved through performance, social participation, but also through personal individuality. Family rules are applied flexibly and adapted to the needs of its members.

3.3. *Paths of Transmission of Religious Influences*

I will now move from the heuristics to the core question of content. How does the interplay between families' internal orientation and external social orientation affect their ability to pass on Christian religiosity to subsequent generations in a largely secular environment? In general, we see different forms of transmitting family-based religiosity, but, as was to be expected, we also see forms of questioning, even to the point of breaking with religious identification and thus also with church membership. Table 1 provides an overview of the educational background, occupations, and religious affiliations of the families discussed below. Reasons for questioning religious values can include conflicts between norms, e.g., the expectation of gender equality and what one interviewee described as a '*male-dominated church*'. Another reason is conflicts of loyalty in families with disparate worldviews. We also encountered forms of functional shifts in different aspects of Christian religiosity. In one family where the grandparents, mother and children are all Catholic, but the father does not belong to any church and describes himself as a '*heathen*', their connection to the church increasingly lost the community-building function it had had for a long time. Inspired by their father, who had been an active member of his village's volunteer fire brigade for years, his children and even his separated wife realised emotional

experiences of community in the volunteer fire brigade groups. These activities also enabled the separated family to ritualise their otherwise disparate everyday routine to a certain extent. Community building, social integration and ritualisation of everyday life remain intact for the family, but are now replaced by a functional equivalent, the volunteer fire brigade.

In the following, I will discuss in more detail forms of positive religious transmission of Christian religiosity within the family. By positive, I mean that religion is seen as something valuable, even if the family's connection to the church is rather distant. From our material, we can distinguish three forms of transmission: the transmission of family religious references (Section 3.3.1) with hardly any change, (Section 3.3.2) with a decline, and (Section 3.3.3) with an intensification of religiosity in the subsequent generations. The paths often differ again in terms of transmission in conjunction with an expansion or narrowing of the respective social frame of reference. I will explain this abstract schematisation by using a few examples.²³

3.3.1. Transmission with Structurally Consistent, Institutionally Mediated Religiosity and Partial Broadening of the Social Frame of Reference Across Generations

We see this pattern in families with strong and long-standing ties to the church. Purely family-based religiosity may play virtually no role, but it can also be deliberately cultivated. In any case, however, it is strongly influenced by the church. This can certainly lead to changes in religious practice between generations. In the Weinhold family, whose grandparents suffered under the anti-church and anti-religious policies of the GDR era, it was important to demonstrate church affiliation publicly and thus preserve a degree of personal autonomy. Personal questions of faith did not play a discernible role for these grandparents, who were strongly oriented towards tradition and church authority. We only see this in the parents, whereas the eldest granddaughter, whom we interviewed at the age of 15 and who attends a Protestant school, describes family and church as natural and closely related areas of her life. This granddaughter is used to going to church every Sunday with her parents, siblings and grandparents, and also actively participating in church life, for example in the parish choir. Her father is a churchwarden and her mother plays the organ during services and sits at the piano at home when the family sings church-related songs. And on Sundays after church, all three generations meet for lunch together. Family and church socialisation are closely linked here. And this link is supported by mutually reinforcing religious practices.

The situation is somewhat different in the Sternberg family. This family, whose father is the third generation to serve on the church council of his parish, naturally does not engage in any joint religious practices within the family. These take place all the more intensively in the parish. The father's grandmother was already in the church choir, his parents met in this church choir, and his son organises youth services for the parish and beyond during his voluntary social year. However, when it comes to his own family, the father states lapidary: *'We are not a pious family.'* In an individual interview, however, he reveals that he regularly prays before falling asleep at night. We learn something similar from his 18-year-old son. When asked in a family discussion a few months later whether the family members know each other's views on God, the father replies, *'That's intimate.'* We see here that the personal religiosity of family members plays no role in the family itself and is perhaps not supposed to play a role at all. Precisely because religion, when it becomes personal, is something intimate that touches the core of one's personality, but because there are a multitude of issues to deal with in the family and the perspectives of all family members must be integrated, it can obviously be useful to refer religious matters to the relevant institution and its experts.

3.3.2. Transmission with Decreasing Religiosity and an Expansion of the Social Frame of Reference Across Generations

This is a pattern of transmission that confirms the trend of cultural diffusion of religious ties into society (cf. Pollack and Rosta 2025, p. 141). The Lange family belongs to a Methodist congregation in a relatively religiously active area. Religion has been an integral part of the grandparents' everyday life since their youth. Personal prayer has just as important a place in the grandfather's life as weekly church attendance. *'Going to church on Sunday is not a must, but a matter of course.'* During the GDR era, he also worked for the Methodist Church as a caretaker, sexton and gardener. To this day, the grandparents' everyday life is closely linked to that of the congregation and its religiosity.

But their son and his wife already want to break free from what they perceive as the constraints of their Methodist congregation. They struggle with the strictness of everyday life and certain dogmas, such as the belief that homosexuality is a sin. However, they retain their faith. The wife, who travels a lot by car for work, often prays on her way to appointments. *'It's my way of getting into the groove'*, she says. Their two daughters, on the other hand, leave the family at the age of 16 and move to boarding schools far away, then go on to study abroad. The daughters' socio-spatial horizons expand, and with them their range of experiences. While the mother says that she often prayed during the period when the decision about her daughters' early departure was made, for the daughters, the religious influences of their childhood increasingly become options. The older of the two has a partner who considers himself an atheist and challenges her to define her position on religious issues more precisely. When meeting peers at a religious foundation from which she receives a scholarship, she is fascinated by the open way in which they deal with their faith. The 23-year-old is currently searching for her own faith. It was important to her grandparents, *'but they never interfered and told me how I should believe. Instead, it just came up in conversations that it was important to them and that they wanted me to see it in a similar way or recognise its importance.'* On the one hand, we see here that grandparents are presented as agents of faith. This is a particularly striking pattern of religious socialisation in East Germany.²⁴ The parents of this granddaughter, who were already critical of the church, were busy establishing their occupational roles in the 1990s, a period of transformation from the former state-controlled planned economy of the GDR to an open market economy. It was the grandparents who ensured that the family tradition was passed on. On the other hand, it is striking that faith itself remains undefined and is not tied to concrete ideas or practices. One can recognise in this a trait of Protestant inwardness and, at the same time, a moment of individual autonomy. There are orientations, but no coercion. Faith is something personal that eludes any control.

When asked by the interviewer what she would like to pass on to her own children and grandchildren if she had any, the granddaughter of the Lange family says: *'I would also like to give them faith, but I, um, I don't think I'm confident enough myself to know how. . . and I think I would handle it similarly and maybe even introduce them to more ways of looking at spirituality, because praying is, after all, also a form of meditation'*. The granddaughter translates her family's traditional beliefs into a contemporary format by linking them to spirituality and meditation. With this interpretation, she is able to make Christian beliefs relevant to herself, her peer group and the culture around her. One could say that, through this de-specification, the granddaughter allows the beliefs to be watered down.²⁵ At the same time, however, she is also an agent of faith who strives to keep faith alive through her reinterpretation. The question remains, of course, what constitutes her faith. While her grandfather, for whom she feels strong affection, still saw the world from the sphere of his faith, his granddaughter increasingly sees faith from the perspective of her worldly experiences.

Viewed from the outside, this is also associated with a transformative—one might even say culturally defensive—moment: while the grandfather still interpreted the world through the lens of religion (he also sees the ruptures in his life as *'God's providence'*), the granddaughter increasingly views faith from the perspective of her worldly experiences. As a religious form of communication, prayer is no longer seen by her as a natural part of legitimate culture. However, the granddaughter makes prayer compatible with the dominant cultural practices of her everyday life.

3.3.3. Transmission with Decreasing Religiosity and a Narrowing of the Social Frame of Reference Across Generations

This pattern of transmission results in church membership without faith or transcendence and purely inner-worldly experiences of community. I illustrate this with the example of the Schumacher family, whose grandparents had been firmly integrated into their town's Catholic community since their youth. The grandmother worked as a medical practitioner in the GDR, the grandfather as an engineer. However, the expected dissonance between two academics and the anti-religious communist state of East Germany is irrelevant to the grandmother we interviewed. She maintains her religious identity by explicitly distinguishing her undefined faith from rational knowledge: *'... so here we have science, with all the research and discoveries it makes, but I have to say, that doesn't diminish my faith.'* The grandmother claims a religious identity for herself, which also corresponds to an identification with the Catholic Church in her everyday life. In the following two generations, a functional shift takes place in this respect, particularly with regard to lifeworld communitisation. Membership of the church remains unaffected by this, but its relevance in everyday life is undefined.

Among the parents in the Schumacher family, only one parent describes herself as religious, in this case the mother, who belongs to the Catholic Church. The non-denominational father, who describes himself as a *'heathen'*, agreed without discussion to a Catholic marriage and the baptism of his three daughters. The parents live separately; the mother lives with her daughters on a separate floor in the house of her parents, who are the children's grandparents. The church played a central role in the mother's childhood. Attending church services every week was the normal thing to do, and she made friends over coffee afterwards that she still has today. She also went to Christian kids' camps. Church was mainly about community and socialising. It is this sense of community that connects her to the church in a special way. Substantial references and religious practice do not play a discernible role for her as an adult. Her professional development was difficult. She has completed several craft qualifications and a vocational college degree, but her career ambitions remain limited to her closer region of origin.

The granddaughter, the mother's eldest daughter, is 16 years old at the time of the interview. She attributes her connection to the Catholic Church to her grandmother, who read her Bible stories as a child and gave her a travel blessing before holidays. The granddaughter interprets being Catholic as a characteristic inherent to the family: because her parents had her baptised as a child and thus continued this tradition, the granddaughter is also continuing it and is being confirmed. However, being Catholic is no longer an identity marker for her. She reports that, although she attends a Catholic school, it is irrelevant to her relationships with her classmates whether they are Christian or not. She therefore finds herself in a context in which she experiences neither positive nor negative effects due to her religious affiliation. During the family discussion, she agrees with her mother's criticism of the Catholic Church, saying that its ability to build community has been replaced by compulsory participation. For example, she talks about the substitute contributions she had to make when she was unable to attend communion classes and the associated threat that she would not be confirmed otherwise.

Besides being a member of the Catholic Church, which is a continuation of her mum's family tradition, the granddaughter is also a member of the volunteer fire brigade, a family tradition on her dad's side that is closely linked to her dad's village, where she spent her childhood. Although she no longer lives in the village, she attends the youth fire brigade meetings every two weeks and reports on them in family discussions after her sister has told them about the children's fire brigade meetings: *'Yeah, we do pretty much the same thing, just a bit more. Every other Friday, in the week when the children's fire brigade would also be on, and then (1) um duty with the active fire brigade. So everything you are. (Father laughs loudly, 2).'*

The activities of the youth fire brigade are practical in nature, similar to those of the children's fire brigade listed earlier by her younger sister. Similarly to the Catholic Church, there is also a tiered system here. In the Catholic Church, the granddaughter has already completed these stages—baptism, first communion, confirmation—but in the volunteer fire brigade, she has yet to reach the active firefighter stage. It is striking that progressing through the levels of the Catholic Church has led to a rather passive membership. Although she has not shied away from church ceremonies, they have not led to an identification with the church or to practical action. The granddaughter reports that she has not attended church since her confirmation. In contrast, the different levels of the fire brigade mean ever greater involvement and activity for her. There she acquires practical skills that are constantly expanded and practised in the community. The youth fire brigade is thus an extension of the content and practices of the children's fire brigade and at the same time serves as preparation for the active fire brigade, to which her father still belongs.

It can be said that formal membership of the Catholic Church is maintained and confirmed with confirmation. However, there is no connection to everyday life or even faith-based connection—except for saying grace with her grandparents. Individual references to faith are vague at best, and the content conveyed by the Church remains unfamiliar to the granddaughter, as she has not experienced the Church as a place of positive community. The function of community building, which was still a fact of life for the grandmother, even though she defensively distinguishes her faith from scientific knowledge, was still associated with the Church in the mother's memory. For the granddaughter, however, this function is now fulfilled by the volunteer fire brigade. What we see here is a functional transfer of the communitising function to the realm of a secular institution. Although both lines of tradition established by the parents are taken up by the granddaughter, one is continued rather passively, while the other is actively lived. The granddaughter also follows her parents' patterns in her socio-spatial relationships. While her grandparents left their small town to study in a city and then returned to their small town, her mother remained in her parents' small town despite her difficulties in establishing herself professionally. And even the granddaughter, who is about to take her school-leaving exams, has no intention of expanding her educational and career opportunities by going to university in one of the nearby cities. Her goal is to stay in her small hometown or her father's village and train as a physiotherapist.²⁶

3.3.4. Transmission with Intensified Religiosity and a Narrowing of the Social Frame of Reference Across Generations

This pattern of transmission involves a particularly cohesive internal orientation. The grandfather of the Fischer family is the sole shareholder of a medium-sized family business in a relatively religiously vibrant community.²⁷ In addition to his wife, his three sons and daughter are also involved in the company to varying degrees. His daughter is set to take over her father's role as a shareholder in the future, and his eldest son, whom we also interviewed, is the managing director of a sub-company. The grandparents and their three sons live in the direct neighbourhood, partly under the same roof. A few years ago, the daughter moved with her family to a neighbouring village, where she is involved in a

regional church community. From the family's internal perspective, this was a far-reaching act of emancipation, as all other family members belong to a free evangelical community that plays a key role in shaping the family's mindset. Religion has a very comprehensive influence on the entire family. All family issues, from choosing a partner and raising children to social relationships in the workplace, are subject to a religious functional paradigm and are dealt with in a religious manner. Given the normative demands this entails, everyday life in this family becomes a constant test. Another of the grandfather's sons lives with a divorced woman. The grandfather, who otherwise acts as a patriarch both internally and externally—he belongs to a political party, represents business interests there and talks openly about his contacts in high-level politics—makes no secret of how much this situation burdens him: *'I say, listen, if you know exactly what you want, then I don't think that's a good thing, but God can write straight even on crooked lines. Then we won't reject you as our son in any way, but you will remain our son and we will love you. And then we will come to terms with this situation.'*

Here we see that the 'methodical lifestyle'²⁸ that otherwise follows an inner order and is reminiscent of Max Weber is beginning to crack. In addition to the religiously inspired discipline of lifestyle, this deeply religious grandfather has another, worldly value: family. Even if his son does not live up to his expectations, he is allowed to remain a member of the family. The religious functional paradigm reaches its limits here. Of course, this does not invalidate the religious probationary dynamic. On the contrary, as the family generations follow one another, the scope of life narrows even further. The grandson of the Fischer family we interviewed attends a Christian secondary school. However, the 14-year-old judges his predominantly Christian classmates according to whether they are converted or not. He only wants to be friends with young people who, like himself, are also converted. This family's selective social relationships are driven by a desire to avoid contingency, i.e., situations that are open to decision-making, as far as possible. From a micro perspective, however, it is precisely this type of contingency avoidance that repeatedly causes new tensions.

During the family discussion, it emerges, for example, that the adult children working in the family business do not like it when their father wants to discuss company matters during their Sunday lunch together. At this point, the patriarch is shown his limits. In this family, too, there is a desire for a break from the religious paradigm of probation²⁹ and a separation between professional and (semi-private) religious practices. It is therefore not a given that a strong normative internal orientation actually ensures the transmission of these norms within the family. A world view with very selective social references tends to become rigid and less flexible in responding to environmental demands. It was only during the family discussion that we got to know the grandfather's daughter. She openly addressed conflicts with her father regarding the career path he had mapped out for her in his company. As the only child to graduate from high school, she would have liked to pursue a creative career, perhaps even go to university. But there was no scope for such stubbornness in her family. Her father wanted her to train as an office clerk so that she could work in his company. Later, she moved to the neighbouring village with her husband and children, thereby also individuating herself ideologically. She now belongs to a different Christian community. Overall, a strange ambivalence emerges here: the strong normative cohesion of the family creates a remarkable internal differentiation and thus a tension that is resolved by the daughter through an expansion of her social frame of reference, which allows her more autonomy than the limited opportunities in her family of origin.

3.3.5. Transmission with Intensified Religiosity and an Expansion of the Social Frame of Reference Across Generations

The distinctive feature of this pattern is that when religious ties are challenged by social reality, they do not lead to a defensive specification of religious belief or to its erosion. Of course, it is inevitable that normative ties will be in constant tension with social reality. However, to the extent that they prove themselves in real experiences, processes of reflexive examination, reinterpretation of beliefs, their connection with new contexts and an updating of religious forms of meaning can also occur. We see this in the Ackermann family, whose three generations lived together in a house on the outskirts of a small town until the granddaughter spent a year abroad after graduating from high school and then went to study in a city in another federal state. Her mother was baptised as a toddler and joined the state socialist party SED in the GDR as a young woman, as had her parents, who had both passed away by the time of the interview. In 1987, she began studying at the Komsomol University in Moscow. The Komsomol was the youth organisation of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The university trained future leaders of the Komsomol and socialist youth organisations from other countries. The mother completed her studies one month before the August putsch in 1991 with a degree in ‘Teacher of History and Methods of Communist Education’ and returned to her hometown. The mother had actually aspired to a career in the GDR state apparatus. However, when she returned to Germany, the GDR no longer existed and she had to completely reorient herself professionally, which required considerable effort on her part. The granddaughter’s father is a train driver by profession and was stationed away from home for long periods during her childhood.

In the individual interview, the granddaughter sees a ‘*striking contrast*’ between her relationship to the GDR and the current system in Germany and that of her parents. According to the granddaughter, her parents ‘*greatly glorify the GDR*’. Despite these political tensions, this family also exhibits a strong cohesive internal orientation, which is based in particular on religion. The paternal grandmother, whom we also interviewed, feels carried by her faith. She reads the Bible every day and has been hosting a home group for the regional church community in her living room for 20 years, which her granddaughter has also attended since she was a small child. She also learned the Lord’s Prayer from her grandmother, which she was able to recite by heart at the age of 5, much to her grandmother’s pride. Her father, who like his father had been on the parish council for some time, said to her when she went to London for a year after graduating from high school: ‘*No matter where you are in the world, as soon as you find a community, a Christian community, it’s like a piece of home, a piece of (1) coming home.*’ But it is also this same father with whom the young woman gets into political discussions when she later goes to study in a German city. Among other things, they discuss vegan nutrition, coronavirus measures, racism, attitudes towards same-sex partnerships, the war in Ukraine and the role of the USA in the world. The granddaughter, who describes herself as a ‘*left-wing feminist*’ in the individual interview, moves into a Christian shared flat at her place of study after some time. Through her studies, which have made her more aware of the issues mentioned, and with new people in her life, she has become ‘*more certain*’ of her faith. She learns about the different attitudes of her new flatmates and finds this enriching. Before meals together, they say a short prayer in their own words. Although she experienced a strongly institutionalised Christian socialisation as a child and teenager, from the children’s choir to a Christian primary school, from Christian teaching to confirmation and the Christian youth group, she only knew classic table prayers from her parents’ home, such as ‘Every little animal has its food’, which were said on special occasions such as birthday parties. She feels that the free prayers in her shared flat are more suited to her current life situation. This has made her more confident in her religious identity. She has been familiar with

conversations with non-religious people since her youth. While she does not wish to justify her faith against accusations or convince others of it, she is interested in mutual exchange when others, whether non-religious or of a different faith, approach her openly. She also bases her differing views from her father on topics such as racism or homosexuality on her faith: *‘In this debate about homosexuality, I just don’t understand why people get so upset about it, because I kind of think that even if it were a sin in God’s eyes, which I don’t believe it is (1), who am I to judge?’*

Here we see not only different political and socio-ethical positions in the third generation of the family than in the generations of the parents and grandparents. That alone is perhaps not surprising. Two things are interesting here: firstly, the granddaughter’s positions are based on religion. In contrast to her parents and her grandmother, who are critical towards state structures and political culture in today’s Germany, the granddaughter’s perspective involves a mutual integration of religion and lifeworld.

Secondly, the differences between the generations lie not only in their political positions, but also in the related differences in their religiously based attitudes. While the father, referring to what he learned in Christian teaching and confirmation classes in his youth, clearly criticises the closing sermon of the 2023 Church Congress, which stated that ‘God is queer’³⁰, the granddaughter can justify her self-restraint towards people with different orientations on religious grounds: *‘my responsibility is to accept and support people as they are, with the best intentions I can muster. . . . And I believe that this also defines much of my faith.’* It is therefore also the religiously based ability to decentralise one’s own perspective that distinguishes the granddaughter from her father.

And thirdly, it is interesting that the family does not fall apart because of this. Quite the opposite, actually. Even though there is always tension in the family, in the end, it is the religious connections that keep the family together, even when its members disagree. The mother sums up these arguments with the simple sentence: *‘We love each other, after all.’* Here, it is striking that religiosity has disparate effects. It unites family members despite their differing political and theological views. Unlike in the previously mentioned families, however, the community-building effect of the Christian faith is not accompanied by shared values. This means that it is possible for religiosity to be passed on, but its social manifestation differs significantly between generations. It is possible to have different opinions on issues such as gender recognition, nutrition, the war in Ukraine and the effectiveness of state institutions in today’s Germany, and still celebrate the church calendar and family members’ birthdays together. We see from this that religious attitudes, due to their reference to God or their transcendence, always require interpretation in their social concretisation. At the same time, it is precisely this reference to something greater, to God, that makes it possible to transcend different positions in the world religiously and thereby create community.

Table 1. Social data of the families.

Family	Age *	Education	Profession	Religious Affiliation
Lange				
Grandfather	70–80	Secondary school certificate	Pensioner, fmr. technical occupation	Protestant free church
Mother	40–50	Secondary school certificate	Media	Protestant free church
Granddaughter	20–30	Abitur (high school diploma)	University student	Protestant free church
Schumacher				
Grandmother	70–80	University diploma	Pensioner, fmr. doctor	Roman Catholic
Mother	40–50	University diploma	Craftsmanship	Roman Catholic
Father	40–50	Master craftsman	Craftsmanship	Non-denominational
Granddaughter	14–20	/	Student	Roman Catholic

Table 1. Cont.

Family	Age *	Education	Profession	Religious Affiliation
Sternberg				
Grandfather	70–80	University diploma	Pensioner, fmr. engineer	Protestant regional church
Father	40–50	State Exam	Finance	Protestant regional church
Grandson	14–20	Abitur (high school diploma)	Voluntary service	Protestant regional church
Weinhold				
Grandfather	70–80	University diploma	Pensioner, fmr. construction and politician	Protestant regional church
Mother	40–50	University diploma	Finance & Administration	Protestant regional church
Granddaughter	14–20	/	Student	Protestant regional church
Fischer				
Grandfather	60–70	Master craftsman	Entrepreneur	Protestant free church
Father	30–40	Business apprenticeship	Entrepreneur	Protestant free church
Grandson	14–20	/	Student	Protestant free church
Ackermann				
Grandmother	80–90	Primary school certificate	Pensioner, fmr. sales and industrial work	Protestant regional church
Mother	50–60	University diploma	Finance & Administration	Protestant regional church
Granddaughter	20–30	Abitur (high school diploma)	University student	Protestant regional church

* For reasons of anonymity, ages are given in margins of 10 years. None of the interviewees in the individual interviews were younger than 14 years old.

4. Discussion

The described pathways of transmission of Christian religiosity are based on a diachronic transmission process between at least three family generations. The illustration (Figure 4) presents a typological overview of the transmission process. The individual transmission pathways and the families representing them each stand on their own. At the same time, according to our theory-driven sampling, they are also guided by certain criteria: an understanding of the ideological and religious constellations in the respective families, their social frame of reference and its changes, and the relationship between religion and lifeworld. In this respect, the families discussed and their respective normative patterns always point beyond themselves.

In the overall view, it is confirmed that familial transmission processes of Christian religiosity are possible both in families with selective and in families with open social relationships. However, transmission is particularly sustainable in terms of socialisation when it is combined with openness to the social environment. Only when traditionally inherited forms of meaning are experienced not only in the limited space of the family, but are also exposed to social testing in different social fields through experiences of plurality and difference, can they develop a diverse orienting effect. What is important is that traditional forms of religiosity are reflexively appropriated through personal reflection and, moreover, internalised through religious practice. The expansion of the social frame of reference, particularly among the youngest generation, but sometimes also triggered by grandchildren among their parents and grandparents, leads to encounters with different world views, socio-cultural contexts and lifestyles. As we have seen, this does not always, but often results in a relativisation or even a conscious withdrawal of religious convictions. The social persistence of religious patterns of meaning increasingly lacks social embedding and corresponding opportunities for coupling through communication.³¹ Not least, as we have seen, secular offerings that seek to alter consciousness, such as meditation or emotional bonding in the volunteer fire brigade, often appear more attractive than the binding nature of religious norms (Stolz 2013).³² In addition to the diachronic decline in religion across generations, functional equivalents also play a significant role in the

decline of religious transmission. The extent to which religion can even be perceived and utilised as a source of meaning remains largely questionable. The more indifferent religion appears to the individual, the more difficult it becomes to transmit religious values. This corresponds to the fact that religiosity rarely has a transcendent meaning in everyday family life. Insofar as it plays a role in the life of families at all, Christian religiosity synchronises everyday family life by creating community through rituals and symbolic order. Religious institutions, especially the Church, always play a role as corresponding and supportive socialisation authorities. We have not found any purely family religiosity.

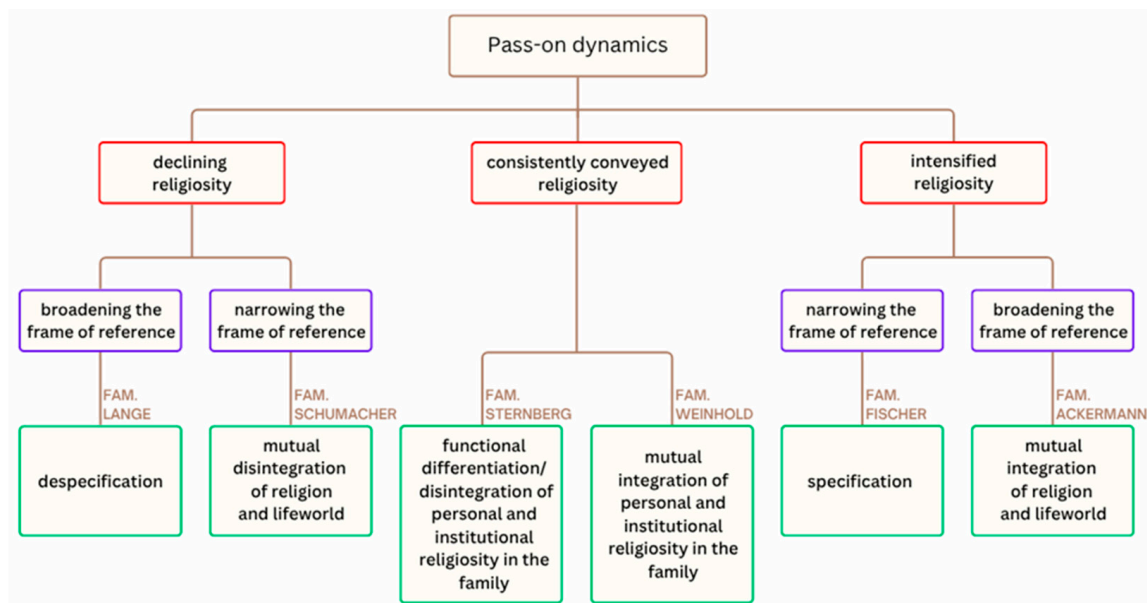


Figure 4. Typology of the transmission of Christian religiosity in East Germany. Source: own illustration.

In order to illustrate the specific nature of the religious-cultural disposition in East Germany, I will conclude by abstracting from the cases outlined above of the transmission of Christian religiosity within families, drawing on aggregated data from the most recent survey of church membership conducted by the two major Christian churches in Germany.³³ This reveals surprising differences in the constellations of religious transmission between East and West Germany, which result primarily from the socio-cultural differences between East and West. From such a broader perspective, religiosity and its transmission appear to be more dynamic in the East—this thesis is proposed here—than in West Germany, where the transmission of religion tends to follow more traditional patterns.

I start with the impact of the family. The *socialising influence of the mother, father and grandparents* is valued more highly among Protestants in the East than among the East German population as a whole. In the West, the opposite is true. At the same time, however, secondary socialisation institutions such as church youth groups, leisure activities and travel play a considerably greater role among Protestants in the East than among the population as a whole. These differences are much less pronounced in West Germany (see Table 2).

With regard to *social mobility*, the picture is as follows: among East Germans, those who have moved from their region of origin to another location during their lifetime are more religious than those who have remained in their region. This corresponds to the fact that in the largest worldview group among East Germans, the non-denominational, at 76 percent,³⁴ the proportion of those who have remained in their region of origin is greater than the proportion of non-denominational people who have moved away from there (see Table 3).

Table 2. Influence towards religious issues during childhood and adolescence **.

Items	West	East
Mother	61.7 63.2	56.5 65.6
Father	41.7 38.7	43.5 45.9
Grandparents	35.6 33.7	35.6 44.6
Siblings	13.0 11.0	9.9 13.9
Friends	22.4 23.0	23.5 31.8
Religious education	40.6 46.7	17.8 32.9
Kindergarten	11.8 12.1	5.5 9.5
Confirmation/Jugendweihe (ceremony in which teenagers are given adult social status, esp. in the former GDR)	53.6 70.2	33.3 69.1
Church youth groups	28.6 34.9	17.8 44.7
Church employees	22.4 25.3	17.5 36.5
Volunteer church workers	20.5 24.7	13.2 33.1
Books, media, etc.	22.2 19.2	24.7 20.0
Leisure camps, trips	19.2 21.8	18.7 31.1

** In response to question 123, “Often, one’s later attitude towards religious issues is shaped during childhood and adolescence. Who influenced the development of your later attitude towards religious issues during your childhood and adolescence?” (cf. [EKD 2024b](#)) resulted in the following answers (in percent, black: total population, red: Protestant church members). The calculation was conducted by Edgar Wunder.

Table 3. Social mobility of religious-worldview groups in West and East Germany ***.

		Have You Always Lived in This Region? (Question 152)		Moved Away from the Region Between the Ages of 18 and 24 (Question 153)		I Travel a Lot and Am Often away from the Region Where I Live (Question 42)	
		Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Non-denominational percentage	West	33.6	47.4	35.0	44.3	36.1	43.6
	East	80.8	76.1	81.3	76.3	80.6	77.3
Proportion of ‘church-religious’ people	West	14.8	13.4	13.8	14.8	15.4	12.1
	East	7.8	10.8	7.0	11.3	9.2	8.2

*** Results in percent, black: total population, red: Protestant church members. The calculation was conducted by Edgar Wunder.

If one takes an item that indicates religiosity even more strongly and asks about belief in God, the positive correlation between religion and social mobility is confirmed once again, but only for the East. Among East Germans who have moved away from their region of origin, more people believe in God than among those who have always remained in their place of origin. And those East Germans who believe in God also travel more beyond their region than those who do not believe in God. Among West German believers, the opposite is true (see Table 4). These findings are surprising in two respects: Anyone who, especially in a highly secularised social context, holds an ideologically deviant attitude that is highly dependent on supportive environments, family, community and friends, risks emotional and cognitive tensions and a questioning of one’s own identity when leaving these supportive environments. We saw this in the case of the Fischer family’s grandson, who even as a teenager was careful to only be friends with classmates who, like himself, had also converted, while the Lange family’s granddaughter opened up the religious practice

of prayer to secular plausibility by combining prayer with meditation. The softening of the anchoring of religious routines in everyday life can indeed lead to a relativisation of one's own self-image and to adaptation to secular norms and their internalisation. On the other hand, it must however also be noted that distancing oneself from one's religious background can promote self-reflection. We have seen this in the case of the Ackermann family's granddaughter, who, by expanding her social references and thereby relativising her origins, has developed an independently founded religious attitude and thus also intensified her religiosity. By explaining her religious attitude to others and at the same time embedding it in a convictive community, she achieves autonomy and a deepening of her religious identity. In this way, it is apparently possible even in a secular environment to stabilise one's own religiosity in dense convictive social relationships.

Table 4. Social mobility and belief in God ****.

		Have You Always Lived in This Region? (Question 152)		Moved Away from the Region Between the Ages of 18 and 24 (Question 153)		I Travel a Lot and Am Often away from the Region Where I Live (Question 42)	
		Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Belief in God (Questions 50 and 51)	West	43.0	33.8	41.1	37.2	40.9	37.0
	East	20.3	22.7	19.4	23.2	20.6	21.3

**** Results in percent, black: total population, red: Protestant church members. The calculation was conducted by Edgar Wunder.

The *role of the family* in passing on religious beliefs in East Germany is ambiguous: on the one hand, its importance is rated higher by Protestants in the East than by those in the West, as can be seen from the importance attached to the role of the mother, father and especially grandparents in their own religious development (cf. endnote xxxiv). On the other hand, secondary socialisation through church workers, youth groups, leisure activities and travel have a stronger influence on Protestants in the East than on Protestants in the West (ibid.). The normative influence of the family is therefore particularly strong in the East, but weaker than in the West, where greater importance is attached to primary socialisation within the family. In East Germany, this transmission is only successful in conjunction with institutional authorities. One reason for this may be the high degree of secularisation in the east and the resulting lack of social opportunities for religion. It is maybe precisely this lack of religious resonance in society that leads to an intentionally controlled *dynamisation and diversification of the transmission processes*. This raises the general question of whether, in East Germany, *the individual processes of appropriation of Christian religiosity are more diverse, the paths of religious socialisation more varied, and the patterns of intergenerational transmission more dynamic* than in West Germany, where transmission may still follow more traditional patterns of familial and institutional socialisation.

Ultimately, what connects all families, whether they are internally cohesive or disparate, selective or open in their social relationships, religious or not, is the identity-defining charging of the family as the last place of emotional reassurance, as a secular source of meaning and the highest authority to which everything else is subordinate. Through this absolutisation, the family often becomes a substitute for religion in an uncertain world.

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Data Availability Statement: The data collected in the project are available to the scientific community via the data service centre for qualitative social science research data Bremen. Study report: Steinestel, Nikolai; Findeis, Hagen (2025): Religiosität in Ostdeutschland. Familiäre Kontexte von Tradierung, Abbruch und Neukonstitution. Bremen: FDZ Qualiservice <https://doi.org/10.26092/elib/4804>; Dataset: Findeis, Hagen; Anke, Valerie; von Elm, Anna; Dreier, Lena; Steinestel, Nikolai; Stintmann, Hannes (2025): Religiosität in Ostdeutschland. Familiäre Kontexte von Tradierung, Abbruch und Neukonstitution. Transkripte der Interviews [dataset]. Bremen: PANGAEA, Qualiservice, <https://doi.pangaea.de/10.1594/PANGAEA.986888> (accessed on 6 March 2026).

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

GDR	German Democratic Republic
SED	Socialist Unity Party of Germany
EKD	Protestant Church in Germany
DBK	German Bishops' Conference
KMU	Church Membership Survey
HDV	Humanist Association of Germany (Humanistischer Verband Deutschlands)

Notes

- ¹ Luther assigned marriage to the secular order, thereby distinguishing it from the sacraments of the church. In: On Marriage Matters (1530), *Luthers Werke in WWW* (2006, Weimar Edition (WA) 30 III, pp. 205–48, here p. 205).
- ² *Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der EKD and Katholische Arbeitsstelle für Missionarische Pastoral (SI and KAMP)* (2024, p. 421).
- ³ Over 80 percent of children of Protestant or Catholic church members in Germany are baptized (Fuhrmann et al. 2024, p. 411). In East Germany, however, this applies to less than 30 percent of the total population (Findeis 2023, p. 419). Even among church members, there has been a massive decline in baptisms in some cases (ibid.). Nevertheless, the willingness to baptize among Protestants in East Germany is even higher at 87 percent than in West Germany at 82 percent (Fuhrmann et al. 2024, p. 413). This suggests that church ceremonies in East Germany are less influenced by traditional social conventions and more by individual decisions. The proportion of confirmed Protestant church members in Germany is just over 80 percent, while the proportion of Christian marriages and funerals is lower (Findeis 2023, pp. 420–21). In general, it is clear that church ceremonies continue to be primarily family rituals. This is true even when these rituals are secularized from within, in terms of their normative references, and religious rites of passage, especially in regions with traditionally more stable church membership, are attributed by those involved primarily to social conventions (baptism as a family celebration, confirmation as a good old tradition, receiving gifts as a motive for confirmation) (ibid., pp. 419–21).
- ⁴ The project has been funded by the German Research Foundation since 2022. See <https://religiositaet-in-ostdeutschland.theologie.uni-halle.de/> (accessed on 6 March 2026). In addition to the author, the following persons were involved in the collection and analysis of the data: Valerie Anke, Lena Dreier, Anna-Maria von Elm, Nikolai Steinestel and Hannes Stintmann.
- ⁵ The annual rate of people leaving the two major Christian churches in Germany as a whole was recently just under 2 percent. For the Catholic Church, see DBK (2025, p. 86) and for the Protestant churches in the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland see EKD (2024a, p. 36). For the period since 1950, see Pollack and Rosta (2025, pp. 99–103).
- ⁶ The figure refers to a workshop for the Dataset of Integrated Measures of Religiosity, 23 September 2023, at the University of Białystok, Poland. For a description of the dataset see Kiszkiel et al. (2024).
- ⁷ 19 percent of the German population agreed with the statement 'I believe that there is a God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ.' Even among church members, only a minority agreed with this statement, with 29 percent of Protestants and 32 percent of Catholics agreeing (Pollack et al. 2024, pp. 140–42). Ten years earlier, in the 5th Church Membership Survey, 61 percent of Protestant church members had agreed with this statement (Wunder et al. 2023, p. 33). The dramatic nature of this decline in a belief that is central to Christian self-understanding is particularly evident in East Germany, where only 29 percent of the total

population still professes a belief in God or higher powers (Pollack et al. 2024, p. 142). In the West, on the other hand, the figure is still 52 percent (ibid.). A comparison of the development of belief in God between West and East Germany over time since 1991 is provided by Pollack and Rosta (2025, p. 130ff).

See also Gärtner et al. (2024). The overview of their international joint project with five country studies also attributes the decisive role in the familial transmission of religiosity to parents (Beyer and Gärtner 2025, p. 375), whereby the influence of mothers on religious education tends to decline over the generations and is not compensated for by other family members.

(Ibid., p. 809); see also Voas and Storm (2012); Bengtson et al. (2009) as well as the long-term study conducted over nearly four decades by Vern Bengtson's group in the USA (Bengtson et al. 2009; Bengtson 2017).

They write: "Contrary to our expectations, secularisation seems to happen largely independently of attributes of the parents or their immediate surroundings (tests of H2a,b,c). In fact, we find no specific predictors mainly responsible for incomplete transmission of church attendance." (ibid.). The proximity of the respondents to their parents also has no significant influence on religious transmission (ibid., p. 822f.).

This corresponds with the findings of the 6th KMU survey, which showed that 87 percent of the German population agreed with the statement "No religion is better than any other—all religions are equally right or wrong" (Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der EKD and Katholische Arbeitsstelle für Missionarische Pastoral (SI and KAMP) (2024), p. 174).

Stolz (2020) provides an overview of the findings of quantitative secularization research since the turn of the millennium. In it, he describes how religion and individual religiosity are related to uncertainty, education, socialisation, secular change, secular competition, pluralism, and state regulation. In the introduction to the latest German-language edition of their empirically broad-based work "Religion and Modernity" Pollack and Rosta (2025, pp. 9–23) state that "such a dramatic change in the social religious situation has occurred that the decline in religious and church ties that has taken place in many regions of the world over the last two decades has become impossible to ignore" (ibid., p. 11; translation by the author).

Pollack and Rosta (2025) refer to corresponding analyses (pp. 392–459), but they themselves also come to the conclusion "that the religious differences are smaller than is generally assumed . . . and may even be suitable for initiating a phase of religious convergence between the two continents after a phase of religious divergence" (ibid., p. 397; translation by the author).

Following on from Mannheim's thesis that social change takes place in the succession of historical generations, Vera King emphasises in her theory of adolescence the transformative significance of adolescence as a transitional phase, including in its socio-cultural dimension: "In modernisierten Gesellschaften bietet Adoleszenz die Voraussetzung für Tradierung als auch dafür, im Zuge der gesellschaftlichen Vorbereitung auf das 'Neueinsetzen neuer Kulturträger' (Mannheim) Tradition und soziale Erbschaften zu transzendieren." (King 2013, p. 278).

In addition to broadening the family generational perspective on religion-related aspects and the question of other family members (e.g., other children, siblings, aunts, uncles), the social data sheet also served to record some characteristics relevant to the normative positioning of the subjects' social structural anchoring, such as their income or formal education.

In addition to highly secularised, often urban regions, there are also areas in the eastern German states that have historically been more religiously influenced and where the number of church members is still higher than in other regions, for example in the Erzgebirge Mountains. Here, members of the Catholic and Protestant churches together account for 32 percent of the population, which means that the number of church members is approximately 50 percent higher than the average for all eastern German states. For the Erzgebirge Mountains see Ökumenischer Kirchenatlas (2024).

The wide geographical distribution of this sample reflects the inherent characteristics of the phenomenon we are investigating, namely religious family socialisation, a socio-structural and milieu-specific differentiation along the distinction between urban-secular and rural social spaces, some of which still have a considerably higher proportion of church members and corresponding network structures. A theory-driven sampling procedure was therefore used. The aim was to reconstruct as wide a range of familial socialisation as possible in a comparative manner and thus achieve a "representativeness of concepts" (Corbin and Strauss 1990, p. 421).

According to a survey conducted by the Körber Foundation in July 2025, 71 percent of Germans have a high or very high level of trust in science. This is by far the highest level of trust among all institutions surveyed, followed by the Federal Constitutional Court with 56 percent (Statista 2025). The Science Barometer, commissioned by leading German scientific organisations, has also reported stable confidence levels in science and research since 2014 (Wissenschaftsbarometer 2025). According to this, 54 percent of Germans had high or very high confidence in science in 2025 (ibid.).

However, the data on differences in trust in science between West and East Germans is only of limited reliability (MDR 2025).

Cf. their website: <https://humanismus.de/> (accessed on 6 March 2026).

Methodologically, the sequence-analytical deepening of data evaluation, as opposed to a purely coding- and category-centered application of grounded theory methodology, is understood as an analytical step focused on the details of meaning reconstruction. The aim is to identify and analytically secure possible surpluses of meaning without prematurely synthesizing them pragmatically. Ultimately, however, this step also aims at a categorical theoretisation of social patterns of meaning.

- ²² In our further analysis, we will search for systematic criteria that will allow us to consolidate the empirical material with the aim of creating family biographies and generational portraits as well as typological analyses that focus on the transmission of normative influences across family generations (Cf. [Elm et al. 2025](#); [Findeis et al. 2026](#)).
- ²³ The patterns outlined in the following are the result of intensive inductive work on empirical material and are therefore not merely illustrations of a preconceived hypothesis-testing heuristic.
- ²⁴ Among East German Protestant church members, 45 percent state that their grandparents had an influence on their later attitudes towards religious issues during their childhood. Among West German Protestant church members, this applies to 34 percent. I thank Edgar Wunder, consultant for strategic planning and knowledge management at the EKD Church Office, for calculating this and the following data. The calculation for question 122 KMU 6 can be found in [EKD \(2024b\)](#).
- ²⁵ [Pollack and Rosta \(2025\)](#) state that “when religious identity threatens to merge with non-religious functions and be absorbed by them, there is a danger that it will tend to dissolve into the non-religious.” (p. 555, translated by the author).
- ²⁶ For the relationship between social background, social mobility, and educational and employment trajectories among young people transitioning from school to vocational training and higher education (see [Behringer 2025](#)).
- ²⁷ In this political municipality of approximately 3000 inhabitants, more than 50 percent of the population belong to a Christian church registered in the official population register (own research).
- ²⁸ [Weber \(2025\)](#) developed the term in his analysis of ascetic Protestantism. See *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905/1920), here II. The Professional Ethics of Ascetic Protestantism, in the section on Asceticism and Protestantism: <https://mwg-digital.badw.de/protestantische-ethik-2/#askese-und-kapitalismus> (accessed on 6 March 2026).
- ²⁹ The idea of interpreting life as a field of probation before God is also already established as a central religious structure of meaning in Weber’s work. For him is the “Bewährungsgedanke als psychologischer Ausgangspunkt der methodischen Sittlichkeit gerade an der Gnadenwahllehre und ihrer Bedeutung für das Alltagsleben so sehr in ‘Reinkultur’ zu studieren”. (ibid., p. 304).
- ³⁰ The closing sermon of the 2023 Church Congress from Pastor Quinton Ceasar has been published in [Jahn and Rentsch \(2024\)](#), pp. 475–79, here p. 478).
- ³¹ Our interviews with families in less secularised regions show that these families can also rely on their vibrant church and religious environment when passing on the Christian faith.
- ³² The more habitual secular practices become, the less important religion becomes (ibid., p. 39f.). “In consumer societies with free choice and both secular and religious options, individuals learn that, in principle, all products and services should be tailored to their needs” (translation of the original text by the author, ibid., p. 40).
- ³³ Cf. here and below: [Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der EKD and Katholische Arbeitsstelle für Missionarische Pastoral \(SI and KAMP\) \(2024\)](#). For the survey questionnaire, see [EKD \(2024b\)](#) and for the corresponding basic count see [EKD \(2024c\)](#).
- ³⁴ Cf. [Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der EKD and Katholische Arbeitsstelle für Missionarische Pastoral \(SI and KAMP\) \(2024\)](#), p. 195).

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