

## **Weltanschauung als Erzählkultur: Zur Konstruktion von Religion und Sozialismus in Staatsbürgerkundes Schulbüchern der DDR**

[The Narrative Structure of a Secular Worldview: On the Construction of Religion and Socialism in Civil School Textbooks of the German Democratic Republic].

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### *Abstract*

Is socialism a religion? This question has been raised in various forms within academic debates concerned with either the theory of religion or the history of socialism. Especially, historians, political scientists, and theologians approached the question of the nature of socialism by referring, in one form or another, to religion. But what motivated these debates? Why should a self-declared secular worldview relate, mirror or mimic religion? The classification of socialism as being a religious phenomenon does not only imply a political statement, but also specific understandings of religion. It is, thus, of specific interest for the study of the discursive dynamics of religion and politics. The book aims to add substantial input to the question of religion and socialism by providing a historical case study on the construction of a secular worldview in its relation to religion; further, it asks for the reasons and structural features of interpretations of socialism as being of a religious or “quasi-religious” nature.

Analysis of the discourse on religion and socialism shows that the classification of socialism and its nature is based on a normative concept of religion, assuming that political systems produce *religion-like* phenomena or surrogates but no authentic religion. With this, the issue of political legitimacy is posed as a question about “true” and “false” religion. A



historical perspective is provided by an in-depth analysis of the development and structure of civil education (*Staatsbürgerkunde*) in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). By focusing on the socialist worldview as it was imparted in East German school textbooks of political and ideological education, the study's approach waives the issue of socialism's potential religious or nonreligious nature and concentrates on how GDR's official real socialist teaching of values operated on the textual level. A narratological approach differentiating between the content as well as the form shows how socialism was construed as a specific culture of remembrance based on a well-defined set of narrative strategies used to impart this worldview, making it plausible and adaptable to citizens' daily concerns.

The narrative culture of socialism like it was outlined in these textbooks included, e.g. narratives like the "myth" of the founding of the socialist state, the political self-understanding of the state as a moral authority, and parables showing the transformation of ordinary citizens into good socialists. While on the historical–philosophical and theoretical level religion and socialism are juxtaposed as incompatible, the socialist "formation of opinions" employed, on a narrative level, specific textual patterns mostly known from Christian textual traditions. Especially the *socialist experience*, following the plot pattern of how an ordinary man becomes a reliable socialist through a convincing and extraordinary work experience, is structurally similar to the conversion narrative and provides the basis for the definition of the aims of secular socialist education – that is, to act, to think and to feel like a socialist.

This pattern illustrates how fundamental the promise of socialism was: far from being restricted to providing moral and ethical standards, socialism was claimed to be of life-changing relevance. Accordingly, the fictional elements, poems, and references to socialist literature that became canonical in the curriculum aimed, first and foremost, to illustrate the *efficacy* of socialism – the evidence for *transformation* was seen as the basis for the truth claims of the dialectic materialism.

This book includes an overview and evaluation of narratological approaches to the study of religious narrative cultures. Narratological

analysis allows for a precise differentiation of content-related and formal aspects of textual traditions and comparative approaches to these traditions. For the case of real socialism, it argues that the similarity of the secular worldview and religion is, first of all, a similarity in the use of narrative patterns or plot devices. With this, the question of whether or not socialism is a religion is transformed into the question about its textual or narrative transmission in relation to the transmission of religious traditions. This offers a new perspective on socialism, understood as a specific narrative culture using general plausibility structures to be found in religious contexts as well. The book posits that an analytical differentiation between content and form has to be taken into account in subsequent theoretical debates on religion.