

The Self and the Collapsed Other: Towards Defining Free Church Identity and Mission in a Post-Christendom Age

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Abstract: Classical free churches in Germany emerged in a context of 'enduring Christendom' and thus defined themselves to a significant degree as antitypes to the mainline church. This article suggests that their collective identity was generated from the beginning through a process of ecclesiological differentiation which has important implications for free churches today. Due to the fact that they now face an increasingly post-Christian, secular environment, it is no longer a viable option to determine their ecclesial identity and missional praxis in opposition and reference to other Christian groups within the sphere of a Christendom culture.

Keywords: ecclesiology, free churches, missiology, secularisation, self-other differentiation

1. Introduction

Free churches, generally speaking, have been a missionally-minded movement from its post-Reformation beginnings. Not sharing the common conviction that continental Europe consists of basically Christian nations in no need of extensive evangelisation, free churches had the intention to make converts, achieve church growth, and establish new faith communities. Yet in Europe today, numbers are declining in most free church denominations even as their missional impact is noticeably decreasing. For Christians in Europe it is more and more difficult to impart their beliefs in a meaningful way to fellow European citizens—and it can hardly be questioned that this 'crisis of mission' pertains to the realm of free churches as well.¹ I suggest that such a 'crisis of mission' constitutes a 'crisis of identity' for a free church movement in which the experience of conversions, church growth, and both personal and communal faith revival

¹ For more on this 'crisis of mission' see, e.g., Stefan Paas, 'The Crisis of Mission in Europe - Is There a Way Out?', *Scandinavian Evangelical e-Journal* 3 (2012), pp. 16-51.

has long been perceived as a significant (if not essential) part of the ecclesiological self.

Quite a lot of ink has been spilled in recent years in the process of describing the changing context of our post-Christendom age and the challenges it raises for Christian mission, especially in Europe.² This article adds to these studies by providing some initial reflections on free church origins and their possible implications for the identity and mission of free churches today. It seems that a better understanding of how free church identity was originally formed and a better grasp of the cultural context in which free churches were initially established would help us to see more clearly the possible reasons for the crisis of mission and identity among them today. In this regard, I propose that this crisis is at least partly due to the fact that what has historically been momentous in informing free church identity and missional activity, i.e., mainline Christianity and the Christendom context it supported, has in the meantime collapsed.

Writing from a continental German perspective, I will first delineate the historical identity of the so-called 'classical' free churches of 'the long nineteenth century' as ecclesial alternatives to a people's church (2.). By focussing on the 'classical' free churches, the most meaningful and efficacious streams of the free church movement are covered, especially those under which the great majority of member- and guest-churches of the 'Coalition of Protestant Free Churches' (*Vereinigung evangelischer Freikirchen*, VEF) can be subsumed.³ I will then briefly expound on the historical context of 'enduring Christendom' as the fertile soil in which free churches were originally planted (3.). A brief summary of social-psychological findings pertaining to processes of group identity (4.) should help us to finally recognise the significance of the history of free churches as we consider, raise questions about, and seek to improve free church identity and mission within the current context of increasingly secular Europe (5.).

² See, e.g., Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2004); id., *Church After Christendom* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005); Rolv Olsen (ed.), *Mission and Postmodernities* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2011); Ryan Bolger (ed.), *The Gospel after Christendom: New Voices, New Cultures, New Expressions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2012); Jeppe Bach Nikolajsen, 'Beyond Sectarianism: The Missional Church in a Post-Christendom Society', *Missiology: An International Review* 41.4 (2013), pp. 462-475.

³ For a complete list of these churches, see the coalition's website under www.vef.de. The classical free churches represent all relevant free church types, i.e., the baptist-congregationalist-independent, the methodist and the pentecostal-charismatic type; cf. Karl Heinz Voigt, *Freikirchen in Deutschland (19. und 20. Jahrhundert)*, Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen III/6 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2004), p. 32.

2. Historical Identity and Mission: Free Churches as Alternatives to a People's Church

Free Churches as Antitypes

When it comes to the historical identity of free churches, we have to be aware that their development in the nineteenth century has been fundamentally characterized by a distinct antagonism to the already existing churches from which they distinguished themselves. In other words, 'ecclesiological demarcation' has always been a constitutive characteristic of the free church movement.⁴ One classic handbook of free churches clearly indicates that the free church phenomenon can only be understood against the background of established mainline churches (*Großkirchen*) and that even the classification 'free church' necessarily assumes the concept of 'church' or, more precisely, that of a 'people's church'.⁵

In his telling free church typology, H.-M. Niethammer has carved out six identity-forming attributes that establish the free church explicitly as an antitype to existing mainstream churches.⁶ First, in postulating the necessary separation of church and state, free churches set themselves up as an antitype to the state church. Secondly, free churches refused to accept the prevailing parochial structures through which all (protestant) residents of a given region were automatically claimed as members of the respective regional church (*Landeskirche*). Thus, free churches stand in contrast to the Constantinian concept of a territorially-organized church (*Territorialkirche*). Thirdly, with their strong missional-evangelistic objective and in denying the prevalent conviction of living in a generally Christian nation, free churches, from the beginning, distinguished themselves from common forms of conventional or nominal Christianity. A fourth characteristic that has to be mentioned is the reintroduction of the Reformation principle of the priesthood of all believers, again separating free churches from a ministerial church (*Amtskirche*), perceived as too hierarchical. A fifth preeminent feature of free churches has historically been their emphasis on the voluntary principle. Thus, as decidedly antitypical to a nominal people's church, free churches insisted on

⁴ See, e.g., Erich Goldbach, *Freikirchen – Erbe, Gestalt und Wirkung*, Bensheimer Hefte 70 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), p. 36, who talks about free churches as "protest movements" (*Protestbewegungen*).

⁵ Hubert Kirchner (ed), *Freikirchen und konfessionelle Minderheitskirchen: Ein Handbuch* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1987), p. 10; also Dietmar Lötze, 'Volkskirche oder Freikirche? Plädoyer für das System Freikirche', *Una Sancta* 59.3 (2004), p. 216: Free churches and a people's or state church are 'both linguistically and ontologically related, because free churches are—at least nominally—always a reaction to the state church'. [All translations of quotes from German sources in this article are my own.]

⁶ Hans-Martin Niethammer, *Kirchenmitgliedschaft in der Freikirche: Kirchensoziologische Studie aufgrund einer empirischen Befragung unter Methodisten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), pp. 35-43. It has to be noticed, of course, that these characteristics are not empirically validated but 'ideal types' (in an ecclesiological-theological sense), reflecting free church self-conception.

a personal confession of faith in Christ (mostly expressed through believers' baptism) as a prerequisite of church membership and therefore generated themselves as churches of conviction or believers' churches. Realizing that it was Martin Luther who had originally wanted to build the church with those 'who want to be Christians in earnest', it is not surprising that free churches understood themselves as the more consequent form of Reformation Christianity. Finally, in a similar vein, the insistence on church discipline confirmed free church identity as a 'contrast model' over against a more or less ethically indifferent type of church where nominal, distanced membership counted as a legitimate form of church affiliation.⁷ Now, generally speaking, given this typology of free churches, it seems appropriate to conclude that free churches have historically established themselves to a significant extent *via negationis*. This is not to say that the (negatively connotated) 'dark screen' of a state or people's church is alone sufficient to define free church identity.⁸ Yet we need to be aware that being the counterpart or antitype of the mainline church certainly influenced not only one's own self-perception, but ecclesial practice and mission as well.

Free Church Identity Formation through Conflict

As free churches distinguished themselves with ostentation from the mainstream church, they, quite naturally, provoked a reaction from the ecclesial establishment that ranged from a frosty distance to outright hostility. Understandably, for free churches this, in turn, cemented the inwardly felt need to define themselves even more consciously in opposition to the 'Landeskirche'. Historically, inter-church relations became extremely conflict-laden and thus some have referred to a 'non-relation' (*Unverhältnis*) or even a 'history of doom' (*Unheilsgeschichte*). Due to its claim for sole ecclesial representation, the national church had to consider the newly established free church communities as hostile intruders into their own territory. Warnings of free church sectarianism were frequently issued from Protestant pulpits.⁹ In polemical writings, the free church movement was accused of being of 'un-German nature' (*undeutsches Wesen*), an 'imported,

⁷ A foundational theological and historical discussion of the praxis of church discipline within free churches is provided by Christoph Raedel, 'Gemeindezucht in Freikirchen im Spannungsfeld von Inklusion und Exklusion', *Freikirchenforschung* 23 (2014), pp. 105-138.

⁸ On this, see Geldbach, *Freikirchen*, p. 36.

⁹ So, e.g., Voigt, *Freikirchen*, p. 120; cf. also Oswald Eggenberger, *Die Freikirchen in Deutschland und in der Schweiz und ihr Verhältnis zu den Volkskirchen* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1964), pp. 142-185; Erich Geldbach, 'Religiöse Polemiken gegen "neue Religionen" im Deutschland des 19. Jahrhunderts', in: Johannes Neumann and Michael W. Fischer (eds), *Toleranz und Repression: Zur Lage religiöser Minderheiten in modernen Gesellschaften* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1987), pp. 170-197; Helmut Obst, 'Reaktionen der evangelischen Landeskirchen im 19. Jahrhundert auf die entstehenden Freikirchen', *Freikirchenforschung* 17 (2008), pp. 39-52.

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⁹ So, e.g., Voigt, *Freikirchen*, p. 120; cf. also Oswald Eggenberger, *Die Freikirchen in Deutschland und in der Schweiz und ihr Verhältnis zu den Volkskirchen* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1964), pp. 142-183; Erich Geldbach, 'Religiöse Polemiken gegen "neue Religionen" im Deutschland des 19. Jahrhunderts', in: Johannes Neumann and Michael W. Fischer (eds), *Toleranz und Repression: Zur Lage religiöser Minderheiten in modernen Gesellschaften* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1987), pp. 170-197; Helmut Obst, 'Reaktionen der evangelischen Landeskirchen im 19. Jahrhundert auf die entstehenden Freikirchen', *Freikirchenforschung* 17 (2008), pp. 39-52.

foreign commodity' bearing an 'un-evangelical, legalistic character'.¹⁰ More painful than any verbal or literary vilification were different forms of ecclesial and governmental sanctions and reprisals. Such societal pressure was caused by the fact that the Protestant state church as the officially recognized majority church (despite legislation concerning religious freedom since 1849) still possessed legal entitlements which gave them access to certain governmental instruments of power. One of the leading German Baptists at the time, J. Köbner, laments: 'And all this [i.e., several kinds of prosecuting measures] were the work of protestant pastors who were able to set in motion the subservient and friendly secular arm'.¹¹ Space does not allow a more detailed description of these elements of oppression and social marginalisation, but they included such varied forms as forced baptism, prevention of funerals, dissolution of church meetings, house searches, administrative fines, imprisonment, or even expulsion from a given territory.¹²

However different the situation might have been in various regions, it cannot be denied that this historical area of conflict between free church and mainline church had serious consequences – not least for the development of free church identity and congregational praxis. Pressure from the ecclesial antagonist gave rise to a complex social structure: free churches found themselves within an ambivalent spectrum which comprised both inferiority complexes and feelings of superiority. On the one hand, in comparison with the Protestant church, free church Christians felt like a second-rate minority; on the other hand, however, they were inclined to consider themselves superior to the nominal churchgoer because of their own more intensive and more consequent Christian life.¹³ Thus, free churches defined themselves quite ambivalently in opposition to a majority church that they encountered as their bogeyman. This ecclesial counterpart functioned as a necessary point of reference for their own identity formation and, at the same time, (through the mandatory process of differentiation) gave meaning to the free church perspective of Christian existence and piety. As an alternative model of church, free church minorities 'oriented themselves, consciously or

¹⁰ Albert Lührs, *Schutz- und Trutzwort wider die Baptisten* (Berlin: Verlag von Gustav Schlawitz, 1871), p. 8, as well as Th. Kolde, *Der Methodismus und seine Bekämpfung: Ein Vortrag auf der bayrischen Pastorkonferenz zu Erlangen am 23. Juni 1886 gehalten* (Erlangen: Deichert, 1886), pp. 9-11.

¹¹ Quoted by Geldbach, 'Religiöse Polemiken', p. 194.

¹² Baptists had to live with the strongest reprisals, see, e.g., Ian Randall, *Communities of Conviction: Baptist Beginnings in Europe* (Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld, 2009), pp. 61-62, also Herbert Strahm, 'Reaktionen der deutschen Staaten auf die entstehenden Freikirchen', *Freikirchenforschung* 17 (2008), pp. 15-18.

¹³ So, e.g., Stephan Holthaus, 'Konkurrierende Kirchenmodelle in historischer Perspektive: Freikirche – Volkskirche – Bekennende Kirche', in: Helge Stadelmann (ed.), *Bausteine zur Erneuerung der Kirche: Gemeindeaufbau auf der Basis einer biblisch erneuerten Ekklesiologie* (Gießen: Brunnen, 1998), p. 22, footnote 41.

unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally, in thesis and antithesis, towards the mainline churches'.¹⁴

Ecclesial Reference Points for Free Church Mission

In order to uncover even more clearly the process of ecclesiological identity formation among free churches, further questions need to be asked: From which 'pool' did the newly-arising free churches gain their members? Which were the most effective points of contact for their missionary praxis? And, more pointedly, what role did the existing realities of a people's church context play? Pursuing these questions one encounters fairly quickly the accusation of proselytism levelled against the free church movement from their state church opponents. An objective debate about this issue was made difficult because of different and hardly reconcilable conceptions of what actually constitutes proselytism. From the point of view of the *Landeskirche*, it was already considered to be proselytism when someone simply joined a free church congregation, even if that particular person had neither been, in a real sense, a believer, nor had actively taken part in the life of the local church. Being listed in the membership record of the church by way of infant baptism was enough to make any transfer into the free church realm appear to be a case of illegitimate proselytism. Now, from the vantage point of the free churches, there could be no talk of proselytism if formerly unchurched people, alienated from Christ and the faith community, found a new spiritual home in a free church congregation. According to them, it could hardly be objectionable to invite nominal Christians to a more personal and intentional faith in Christ.¹⁵

The main criticism, however, expressed through state church polemic, was that the missional efforts of free church groups were not, in fact, centred on those nominal Christians distanced from the church. Rather, the accusation asserts, it was precisely the active members and regular churchgoers that free churches were indeed eager to consciously entice. There can be no doubt, says contemporary Protestant pastor Th. Geß, that free church 'penitential sermons' lead formerly unconverted 'souls' to Christ. Yet it remains highly problematic that they 'draw towards themselves with great zeal especially the already religiously awakened members of the church'.¹⁶ Repeatedly, free churches were accused of recruiting the core of their gatherings from those previously anchored in the church. According to

¹⁴ Geldbach, *Freikirchen*, p. 160.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Voigt, *Freikirchen*, p. 79. It should be mentioned in passing that by now this is the view to which the ecumenical movement has committed itself.

¹⁶ Th. Geß, *Der Methodismus und die evangelische Kirche Württembergs: Ein Wort zur Verständigung und Mahnung an Amtsbrüder und Gemeinden* (Ludwigsburg: Verlag der Neubert'schen Buchhandlung, 1876), p. 13.

their opponents, they 'appeal exactly to those animated by the Christian faith and to the religiously receptive and then try to detach them from the church and draw them over to themselves'.¹⁷ This is underscored by B. Marchlowitz, who, in her study on baptistic ecclesiology, comments on the approach of Baptist founder figure Oncken:

As a missionary he had a certain strategy: When he came to a place, he would ask for the so-called pious at that particular location. If he succeeded in gaining entry to this group, they then formed the basis for his ongoing missionary activities. At the same time, they also were the most receptive soil for his ideas of a church consisting only of the revived.¹⁸

Generally speaking, it is hard to deny that especially those parts of German Protestantism that had been influenced by the revivalist movement were particularly receptive to the new free church movement. W. Heinrichs, for example, has demonstrated in exemplary fashion that the emergence of several free churches in the Wupper Valley (a nucleus of the German free church movement) was due to their success in appealing to the already revived part of the population. In many respects, free churches found a religious climate which was conducive to their development. Thus, they could establish themselves more effectively and steadily in those places where it was possible to activate revivalist circles.¹⁹

On the whole, it would certainly be too one-sided to ascribe the initial formation and the ensuing membership growth of free churches solely to the affinity of revivalist groups. There can be no doubt that free churches did, indeed, have success among those belonging to a more unchurched ambience. They had no small intake of 'raw folks, the morally decaying, those alienated from church and worship'²⁰, i.e., those sections of the population yet conceded to them as appropriate 'mission fields' by the church polemic.²¹ Even critical voices from a mainline church perspective repeatedly acknowledged that free churches found access to groups of individuals, 'who had not known anything of the word of God and, having formerly been drunkards and criminals, had been changed into orderly people by the Baptists'.²² In light of these observations, the polemic of

¹⁷ Gustav Plitt, *Die Albrechtsleute oder Die evangelische Gemeinschaft: Ein Wort zur Belehrung und Warnung*, (Erlangen: Deichert, 1877), p. 51.

¹⁸ Birgit Marchlowitz, *Freikirchlicher Gemeindebau: Geschichtliche und empirische Untersuchung des baptistischen Gemeindeverständnisses*, *Arbeiten zur Praktischen Theologie* 7 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), pp. 18-19. Cf. also Hans Luckey, *Johann Gerhard Oncken und die Anfänge des deutschen Baptismus* (Kassel: Oncken, 1958), p. 258, who maintained that Oncken was a 'collector [who] gave, with appealing friendliness, a clear shape to those children of God that hitherto lacked direction'.

¹⁹ Wolfgang E. Heinrichs, *Freikirchen—eine moderne Kirchenform: Entstehung und Entwicklung von fünf Freikirchen im Wuppertal* (Gießen: Brunnen, 1989), *passim*. Of course, contemporary ecclesiastical deficits also contributed to the rise of free churches.

²⁰ Geß, *Methodismus*, p. 18.

²¹ Cf. on this Geldbach, *Freikirchen*, pp. 137-138.

²² C. Franklin Arnold, *Der Baptismus und seine Bekämpfung* (Leipzig: Richter, 1887), p. 32.

proponents of the *Landeskirche* appears to be far too biased. Only their deep adherence to territorial and state church thinking can explain the almost indiscriminate accusation of 'intrusion into foreign territory' or 'fishing in foreign ponds'. In this respect, the leading Baptist G.W. Lehmann has plausibly argued in front of the German Protestant Church Congress in 1854 that, quite contrary to what was assumed by opponents, ongoing tirades from Protestant pulpits had led to downright resistance among church people against free church efforts. At the same time, he explicitly denied the claim that 'our numbers are recruited almost completely from believers of other church parties'²³ and later stated that less than 5% of his Baptist church in Berlin had been already converted before their admission into church membership.²⁴ Being aware of the general self-conception as a truly 'missional movement', this should make us hesitant to presume the 'gathering of the revived' as the main goal of the free church endeavour.

Again, this is not to say that the perception of the church establishment was entirely off the mark. We cannot simply dismiss the fact that significant numbers of believing Christians left the mainline church and joined emerging free churches. Yet, ultimately, it is hard to tell in detail whether this was intentionally promoted or merely tacitly accepted. It seems clear, however, that the free church movement was not only dependent on the availability of 'ecclesial points of contact' but was, subsequently, also able to 'use them for their own good'. Tellingly (and, for that matter, quite accurately in light of all the evidence), J. Jüngst, one of the free church critics who managed to retain at least a somewhat objective stance, summarises the situation like this:

Among the pagans, no preliminary work whatsoever has been conducted by the little-valued people's churches of Germany. Here, work is even more thorny than the activities on the Rhine, in Saxony, or in Württemberg [i.e., where the revivalist movement had especially taken root]. But it would be even more necessary. Because it is not the case that the Methodists around us carry out their mission among the religiously and morally corrupted classes of people. For their messengers it is much more tempting to appeal again and again to those persons and revivalist circles that have already been awakened *within the church* to a deeper, more religious life. Because it is here that they most rapidly gain their church members.²⁵

²³ G.W. Lehmann, *Offenes Sendschreiben an den deutschen evangelischen Kirchentag*, Zum 150jährigen Jubiläum der Berliner Baptistengemeinden neu herausgegeben und eingeleitet von Edwin Brandt (Kassel: Oncken, 1987 [orig. Hamburg: Oncken, 1854]), pp. 25-26.

²⁴ Geldbach, *Freikirchen*, p. 140, with reference to Erich Beyreuther, *Der Weg der evangelischen Allianz in Deutschland* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1969), p. 39.

²⁵ Johannes Jüngst, *Der Methodismus in Deutschland: Ein Beitrag zur neuesten Kirchengeschichte* (Gießen: Topelmann, 1906), pp. 113-114.

That Jüngst was not entirely wrong with this slightly sarcastic reference to the especially noticeable dispersion of free churches in regions with above-average rates of piety and ecclesiality would have to be shown separately. Yet, in retrospect, one of the experts on early German Methodism similarly states that this so-called 'missional church' 'has been received well where others have cultivated the field already—either revivalist groups or German-American Christians through letters, papers sent or visits'.²⁶ Therefore, regardless of the actual motives on the part of the free churches (which are difficult to resolve anyway), we can finally conclude that the existing religious circumstances and ecclesial realities in the nineteenth century were, in any case, quite conducive to their development and distribution. Not only those groupings that explicitly started within the prevailing mainline church (like the Methodists) were able to tie in with ecclesial structures and expressions of church life. Those free churches that emerged in greater independence (like the Baptists or the Evangelical Free Church) could also benefit from the surrounding ecclesial conditions as points of reference for their mission.

3. Historical Context: The Emergence of Free Churches Within 'Enduring Christendom'

Anyone concerned historically with the constitutive factors of free church identity needs some awareness of the religious climate in which these new faith communities originated. Thus, briefly turning our attention to the socio-religious signature of nineteenth century Germany, we encounter the simultaneous existence of both significant tendencies toward secularisation as well as the continual, deep-seated presence of cultural Christianity, usually referred to as Christendom.²⁷

Processes of 19th Century Secularisation

In order to explain secularisation processes, German church historiography has established two frequently used key words, namely *Entkirchlichung* (being unchurched) and *Entchristlichung* (de-Christianisation). De-Christianisation refers, in general terms, to the decrease of a specifically Christian imprint as it relates to individual beliefs and personal piety.²⁸ Space

²⁶ Patrick Ph. Streiff, *Der Methodismus in Europa im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, EmK Geschichte 50 (Stuttgart: Medienwerk der EmK, 2003), pp. 110–111. Streiff continues: 'The Methodist mission often developed best, where other protestant revivalist movements had already been active several decades earlier. The coming of the Methodists then kindled the small, still existing flame'.

²⁷ For a definition of Christendom, see, e.g., Hugh McLeod, 'Introduction', in: Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf (eds), *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750–2000* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), p. 1.

²⁸ Cf. Hartmut Lehmann, 'Von der Erforschung der Säkularisierung zur Erforschung von Prozessen der Dechristianisierung und der Rechristianisierung im neuzeitlichen Europa', in: Hartmut Lehmann (ed),

does not allow tracing the decline of essentially Christian interpretations of existence in all its multi-faceted nuances. Suffice it to say that this '[deep] change of religious ideas and conceptions (...) must probably be perceived as the social realm in which 19th century secularisation is most impressively displayed'.²⁹ Closely correlated with this overarching tendency of de-Christianisation, *Entkirchlichung* is another critical, and in some respects more tangible, feature of secularisation³⁰ and is not only expressed in terms of membership withdrawal (which indeed was not possible legally for most of the century) but also and precisely through inner disassociation from, and a decreasing commitment to, the church.³¹ The quantitative decline of church affiliation (*Kirchlichkeit*) can be most clearly measured by means of participation in the Lord's Supper, which, of course, closely correlates with worship attendance in general.³² The participant numbers have been in sharp decline since the middle of the eighteenth century. In cities like Berlin, Hamburg, or Breslau, the number of those taking communion amounted to a mere 10% of those in 1750. In Hannover only 3% of Protestant church members shared in the Lord's Supper regularly, more than 70% at most every five years. Especially in urban areas, generally speaking, 'the church only reached an ever decreasing group of old-established churchgoers for whom church customs remained a significant component of their civic, middle-class existence'.³³ The active regulars of Protestant parishes consisted of rather traditional Christians, 'who stood over against a majority of members that lived on the fringe of the church or were already outright unchurched'.³⁴ Even though there has been a notable contrast between town and countryside, the rural regions followed the urban trend with a temporal delay of only a few decades. At the same time, church customs remained

Säkularisierung, Dechristianisierung, Rechristianisierung im neuzeitlichen Europa: Bilanz und Perspektiven der Forschung (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), p. 13.

²⁹ Lucian Hölscher, 'Säkularisierungsprozesse im deutschen Protestantismus des 19. Jahrhunderts: Ein Vergleich zwischen Bürgertum und Arbeiterschaft', in Hans-Jürgen Puhle (ed), *Bürger in der Gesellschaft der Neuzeit: Wirtschaft - Politik - Kultur* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), p. 249.

³⁰ See, e.g., Wilhelm Gräß, 'Säkularisation/Säkularisierung, VI. Praktisch-theologisch', RGG⁴ 7 (2004), p. 786.

³¹ Stefan Schweyer, *Kontextuelle Kirchentheorie: Eine kritisch-konstruktive Auseinandersetzung mit dem Kirchenverständnis neuerer praktisch-theologischer Entwürfe* (Zürich: TVZ, 2007), p. 39. Signs of a serious crisis within German Protestantism were apparent since the time of the Enlightenment: cf., e.g., Gerhard Besier, *Religion-Nation-Kultur: Die Geschichte der christlichen Kirchen in den gesellschaftlichen Umbrüchen des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1992), pp. 13-14.

³² This short description of the process of Entkirchlichung in Germany draws significantly on the work of Lucian Hölscher; see, e.g., Lucian Hölscher, 'Bürgerliche Religiosität im protestantischen Deutschland des 19. Jahrhunderts', in Wolfgang Schieder (ed), *Religion und Gesellschaft im 19. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1993), esp. pp. 199-203; id., 'Säkularisierungsprozesse', esp. pp. 242-249; id., 'Die Religion des Bürgers: Bürgerliche Frömmigkeit und protestantische Kirche im 19. Jahrhundert', *Historische Zeitschrift* 250 (1990), pp. 595-627; cf. also Thomas Nipperdey, *Religion im Umbruch: Deutschland 1870-1918* (München: Beck, 1988), pp. 118-123.

³³ Karl Kupisch, *Die deutschen Landeskirchen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*. Die Kirche in ihrer Geschichte 4 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), p. 84.

³⁴ Hölscher, 'Die Religion des Bürgers', p. 601.

strong, especially in respect to the so-called rites of passage such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings or funerals. '[N]early all children were baptized and confirmed, well over 90 per cent of weddings were celebrated with a religious service and burials normally took place with a pastor present'.³⁵

The general trend of alienation from the church was evident in varying degrees within different social strata of the population. The educated and mercantile upper middle class (i.e., free entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, engineers etc.)—not least under the impression of a widespread humanistic worldview—were increasingly distant from the church and had comparatively low representation among active churchgoers in the nineteenth century.³⁶ Again, it was the urban bourgeoisie that was especially critical of and dissociated from the church. Similarly preeminent was the religious indifference of the working class. Their alienation from the church was reinforced particularly in industrial areas on the urban fringes due to forced work on Sundays and the structural undersupply of ecclesial care as 'giant parishes made it impossible for the clergy to keep contact with more than a small proportion of their parishioners'.³⁷ Furthermore, there was, notably among the social-democratic working class, a strong aversion against the ecclesial establishment which was perceived as the institutional representative of an unjust political and socio-economic system.³⁸ By contrast, large parts of the lower middle class and the petit bourgeoisie were still significantly attached to the church. The group of craftsmen, small-scale farmers as well as lower and middle-class officials and employees were more actively involved in church life, at least relative to other social classes and within the framework of a generally decreasing impact and binding force of ecclesial institutions. In this regard, L. Hölscher's observation is specifically significant for our study of free church identity. He notes that 'the majority of the new and rapidly growing Protestant religious communities—like Methodists, Baptists, (...)—gained a substantial foothold predominantly

³⁵ Hans Otte, 'More Churches – more Churchgoers: The Lutheran Church in Hanover between 1850 and 1914', in Hugh McLeod (ed), *European Religion in the Age of Great Cities 1830-1930* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 111. See also Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, 'Dechristianisierung: Zur Problemgeschichte eines kulturpolitischen Topos', in Hartmut Lehmann (ed), *Säkularisierung, Dechristianisierung, Rechristianisierung im neuzeitlichen Europa: Bilanz und Perspektiven der Forschung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), pp. 52-53, who speaks about a 'Kasualkirchlichkeit' in which official liturgies for special occasions are understood individually and in terms of one's own life story. According to Hölscher, 'Die Religion des Bürgers', p. 606 (also p. 614), these ecclesial rites had the character of 'mass processing' (especially in urban areas due to the population explosion).

³⁶ On the 'unchurchliness of the educated' see, e.g., also Graf, 'Dechristianisierung', pp. 44-45.

³⁷ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the People of Western Europe 1789-1989*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: University Press, 1997), p. 121, who adds that 'many poor people were so busy just keeping their heads above water that they had no surplus time, money or energy to spend on the church, or any other institution'. Cf. also that they had no surplus time, money or energy to spend on the church, or any other institution'. Cf. also Hugh McLeod, 'Protestantism and the Working Class in Imperial Germany', *European Studies Review* 12 (1982), pp. 327-330.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 337: 'Socialism, then, completed the alienation from the church of many workers'.

among the (...) petty-bourgeois population of the industrial centres'.³⁹ This reinforces our earlier observation that free churches seem to have been especially successful in areas with a good degree of remaining ecclesiality.

Overall, there can be no doubt that the nineteenth century has been an age of far-reaching secularisation, particularly as regards personal beliefs, individual practices of piety, and one's commitment to the church. However, the notion that the era in which the classical free churches emerged was an age beyond Christendom and thus deprived of substantially Christian foundations does not accurately reflect the contemporary socio-religious realities.

The Lasting Significance of 'Enduring Christendom'

It cannot be dismissed that for broad sections of the population the Christian worldview retained its cultural presence as the focal point of socio-religious orientation.⁴⁰ In that sense, different elements of 'enduring Christendom' provided a more or less fertile soil on which the free church movement could develop. This is most noticeable when the analyses of religious conditions are not limited to statistically measurable expressions of religious praxis or ecclesiality, but include other cultural and social dimensions of Christian influence on both private and societal functions.⁴¹ Despite the opposing trend, Christianity, not least in its ecclesial-institutionalized form, remained an important source for the construction of meaning and the formation of individual or collective identity. Historian Th. Nipperdey concludes:

19th century Germany (...) is still an era shaped by Christianity and the church. (...) [It is] moved by the battle about Christendom and modernity, but precisely in this battle, Christendom holds its ground, reforms itself, renews itself, indeed, quite remarkably, obtains public recognition and assertiveness. (...) Religion and the church do not extend into the 19th century as a relic of tradition, but they are, at the same time, products and shaping forces of this century.⁴²

Similarly, W.-D. Hauschild confirms: 'The Christian make-up of middle-class-protestant society in the 19th century was still present when it comes to traditional patterns of behaviour despite considerable processes of alienation from the church'.⁴³ This can be substantiated by several brief observations. Initially, still on a strictly statistical level, we need to remind

³⁹ Hölcher, 'Bürgerliche Religiosität', p. 195.

⁴⁰ E.g., Nipperdey, *Religion im Umbruch*, p. 122.

⁴¹ For a fundamental critique of a one-sided, institution-focused consideration of secularisation processes see Callum W. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*, 2nd ed. (Milton Park: Routledge, 2009).

⁴² Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1800-1866. Bürgerwelt und starker Staat*, 6th ed. (München: Beck, 1993), p. 403.

⁴³ Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, *Lehrbuch der Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 2: Reformation und Neuzeit, 2nd ed. (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 2001), p. 743.

ourselves that in the second half of the nineteenth century more than 98% of the German population were officially members of the (mainline) church.⁴⁴ Major Christian events were gaining in popularity⁴⁵ and statistics show that only a relatively small minority of the urban population—an estimated 10–20%—was alienated from the church to such an extent that it did not take part in church life at all and thus, even in private, followed no hereditary traditions of piety.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the almost universal attendance of confirmation classes ensured the transmission of a doctrinal and moral base that could function as an ongoing frame of reference for further religious reflection.⁴⁷

Elements of Christian religious praxis also remained constitutive for socialisation within the family and the shaping of everyday life.⁴⁸ Saying grace at meals was customary and regular, private Bible reading was still common even among those whose church attendance was rare. Not least in the social segment of the bourgeoisie the Scriptures kept their place as an important part of the educational canon.⁴⁹ Moreover, far beyond middle-class circles, i.e., also in large parts of the rural population and the working-class, the goals of moral education closely correlated with the Christian value system. The traditional ethical norms based on divine revelation continually provided the backbone for the conveying of values within society. In other words, the moral codes of the time were anchored in the Christian faith, so that, conversely, the ethical requirements of Christianity would connect, at least in principle, with the surrounding culture.⁵⁰

If we ask, in addition, how deep Christian convictions were actually rooted in the private life of nineteenth century Germans (or continental Europeans for that matter) we realize, in fact, that while the Christian faith was no longer completely self-evident, we do encounter a significant extent of Christian 'popular or folk religion'.⁵¹ These necessarily plural, multi-

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Reinhard Henkel, *Atlas der Kirchen und der anderen Religionsgemeinschaften* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2001), p. 40.86, who gives the following numbers: 1880 – 62.6% Protestant and 35.99% Roman-Catholic; 1890 – 62.8% Protestant and 35.8% Roman-Catholic.

⁴⁵ Gunilla Budde, *Blütezeit des Bürgertums: Bürgerlichkeit im 19. Jahrhundert*, *Geschichte kompakt* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2009), p. 74; cf. also Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte*, p. 426.

⁴⁶ Lucian Hölscher and Ursula Männich-Polenz, 'Die Sozialstruktur der Kirchengemeinden Hannovers im 19. Jahrhundert: Eine statistische Analyse', *Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für niedersächsische Kirchengeschichte* 88 (1990), pp 182ff.

⁴⁷ Hölscher, 'Bürgerliche Religiosität', p. 205.

⁴⁸ For more details, see Lucian Hölscher, *Geschichte der protestantischen Frömmigkeit* (München: Beck, 2005), pp. 286–288.

⁴⁹ Hölscher, 'Religion des Bürgers', p. 615.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 619.

⁵¹ For a methodologically sound and exemplary demonstration of existing popular religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (though in an Anglo-Saxon context) see Sarah C. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark c.1880-1939* (Oxford: University Press, 1999). Williams' results stand over against an overly narrow secularisation thesis which focuses too much on institutional processes and thus falls short of taking seriously less tangible aspects of religious praxis.

layered and somewhat diffuse religious concepts are, indeed, extremely difficult to trace exactly, yet it seems, generally speaking, that the shared mental categories for the interpretation of existence were—in different strata of society—still tied to core components of a Christian worldview. And even though this popular religion was often gradually removed from classic orthodox beliefs, the vocabulary and symbols of Christian tradition were still being used to describe existential hopes and desires.⁵² The developing free church movement was thus confronted not with a deeply ‘church-based’ culture, but with a common popular religion that was still strongly ‘interwoven’ with elements of Christianity. As far as middle-class religiosity is concerned, L. Hölscher points out that ‘the everyday life of middle-class adults (...) in the 19th century was [also] pervaded to a greater extent than today by religious terms and ideas which embedded the life of the individual into more transcendent relations’.⁵³ Albeit with often quite individualistic-syncretistic twists, it has to be maintained here as well that different streams of bourgeois religiosity took shape through critical engagement with the Christian tradition.

If we finally move beyond the personal religiosity of the German population and focus more on the public weight and influential power of religion, we realize that Christianity still kept an important role in different sectors of public life. The church remained, in principle, a state church and related, as such, to society as a whole. Meanwhile, the mainline churches had significant influence on education policy. The whole educational system, according to H. Nowak, was based on Christendom structures. Religious education was not one subject among others, but yet the ‘integrating overall framework of the educational process’.⁵⁴ Considering the significant successes of Christian publishers in distributing not only the Bible but large quantities of edifying and devotional literature (numbers were in the millions), it seems obvious that Christian initiatives were still in a position to exercise sustainable influence on the faith of large proportions of the population.⁵⁵ After all, the public importance and presence of Christianity is observable also in regard to the great social challenges related to the increasing poverty of the lower classes that arose in the wake of ongoing industrialisation and population growth. As an answer to these challenges,

⁵² Cf., e.g., Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (München: Beck, 2009), p. 1249.

⁵³ Hölscher, *Protestantische Frömmigkeit*, p. 300.

⁵⁴ Helmut Nowak, *Geschichte des Christentums in Deutschland: Religion, Politik und Gesellschaft vom Ende der Aufklärung bis zur Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (München: Beck, 1995), p. 87 (cf. the whole chapter IV on ‘Church and School’, pp. 87–93). Cf. also Anthony J. Steinhoff, ‘Ein zweites konfessionelles Zeitalter? Nachdenken über die Religion im langen 19. Jahrhundert’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 30 (2004), p. 564. ‘The curriculum did not only plant the foundational principles of the faith into the minds of the students, it also played a key role in embedding religious identity into comprehensive social networks’.

⁵⁵ Nowak, *Geschichte des Christentums*, pp. 104–107 (chapter on ‘pious literature’).

the Christian signature of the nineteenth century is also manifest in the extensive social welfare initiatives that emerged not least from a decidedly Protestant context.⁵⁶

On the whole, it therefore seems to be apparent that the megatrend of secularisation cannot obscure the fact that the nineteenth century should be considered—to a significant degree—as an era of ‘enduring Christendom’. Not only were several phases of secularisation interrupted by reactive tendencies of re-Christianisation,⁵⁷ but we have tried to show that while the process of marginalisation of the church was not as advanced as has often been supposed, Christianity remained an influential agent in society and the common cultural narrative was substantially (even though no longer exclusively) Christian. This is to say that the classical free churches have historically operated and developed in a societal context in which a basically Christian culture and mindset could still be assumed and built on.

4. The Self and the Other: Basic Insights from Social Psychology

Basic results of social-psychological research can shed further light on the significance of the historical perspectives developed thus far.⁵⁸ Generally speaking, we need to be aware of the fact, (that one’s own (social) identity is informed and affected by the ‘other’ from whom I set myself apart. The same is true for groups, so-called ‘collective selves’. All kinds of groups, including free churches, find positive meaning, value and perspective by defining themselves with reference to other groups. In this regard, it has become increasingly clear that identity forming processes (especially when it comes to groups) are strongly influenced through dialogue with, exposure to, and especially differentiation from ‘significant others’. In other words, self-other differentiation is essential since ‘we cannot know who we are except by reference to others’.⁵⁹

Within the field of social psychology, a group with which several individuals associate themselves is designated as the ‘in-group’, a *relevant*

⁵⁶ Cf. on this Hauschild, *Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 2, pp. 746, 776, 791–796.

⁵⁷ Hartmut Lehmann, ‘Neupietismus und Säkularisierung: Beobachtungen zum sozialen Umfeld und politischen Hintergrund von Erweckungsbewegung und Gemeinschaftsbewegung’, *Pietismus und Neuzeit* 15 (1989), pp. 42–45. Cf., e.g., also Graf, ‘Dechristianisierung’, p. 50.

⁵⁸ This chapter depends on findings that I have developed in much more detail elsewhere, see Philipp F. Bartholomä, ‘The Ecclesiological Self and the Other: Concepts of Social Identity and Their Implications for Free Churches in Secular Europe’ [in review, forthcoming].

⁵⁹ Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg (eds), *Social Identity Theory: Constructive and Critical Advances* (New York: Harvester, 1990), p. 48. See also Marilyn B. Brewer and Norman Miller, *Intergroup Relations*, Mapping Social Psychology Series (Pacific Grove: Brooks/Cole, 1996).

comparison group is called 'out-group'.⁶⁰ Specific comparisons between in-group and out-group are mandatory as 'we are what we are because they are not what we are'.⁶¹ In other words, in order for any social unit to develop, affirm and communicate particular group characteristics and to thus facilitate the configuration of a distinct social identity, it is necessary for it to have cognitive and emotional access to relevant reference groups.⁶²

Building on these foundational principles of differentiation, two specific concepts of social psychology provide a helpful framework for the study of free churches as a 'religious group' with its own particular identity formation: *Social Identity Theory* (SIT) and *Self-Categorization Theory* (SCT). SIT defines social identity as 'that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership'.⁶³ In addition to this unifying definition, three theoretical principles are at the core of SIT and have been phrased as follows:⁶⁴

1. Individuals strive to achieve or to maintain positive social identity.
2. Positive social identity is based to a large extent on favourable comparisons that can be made between the in-group and some relevant out-groups: the in-group must be perceived as positively differentiated or distinct from the relevant out-groups.
3. When social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals will strive either to leave their existing group and join some more positively distinct group and/or to make their existing group more positively distinct.

The main overall contribution of SIT consists in having demonstrated the correlation between social categorization and social identity. Henri Tajfel, considered the 'founder' of SIT, sums it up by saying that

the positive aspects of social identity (...) the reinterpretation of attributes and the engagement in social action (...) only acquire meaning in relation to, or in comparison with, other groups. (...) The characteristics of one's group as a

⁶⁰ See, e.g., Eliot R. Smith and Diane M. Mackie, *Social Psychology*, 3rd ed. (New York: Psychology Press, 2007), pp. 188-209.

⁶¹ Henri Tajfel and Joseph P. Forgas, 'Social Categorization: Cognitions, values and groups', in Joseph P. Forgas (ed), *Social Cognition* (London: Academic Press, 1981), p. 24.

⁶² For more on the question as to whether in-groups necessarily require out-groups, see Brewer and Miller, *Intergroup Relations*, pp. 47-48.

⁶³ Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 255. For a similar early definition, see, e.g., Henri Tajfel, 'La Catégorisation sociale', in Serge Moscovici (ed), *Introduction à la psychologie sociale*, vol. 1 (Paris: Larousse, 1972), p. 292 (quoted and translated in John C. Turner, 'Social comparison and social identity: Some prospects for intergroup behaviour', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 5 [1975], p. 7).

⁶⁴ See, e.g., Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, 'The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior', in Stephen Worchel and W. G. Austin (eds), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1986), p. 13; also Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg, 'An Introduction to the Social Identity Approach', in Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg (eds), *Social Identity Theory: Constructive and Critical Advances* (New York: Harvester, 1990), pp. 1-9.

whole (...) achieve most of their significance in relation to perceived differences from other groups and the value connotations of these differences (...). A group becomes a group in the sense of being perceived as having common characteristics or common fate only because other groups are present in the environment.⁶⁵

John C. Turner, one of Tajfel's students, has supplemented and advanced the study of social identity by developing the so-called *Self-Categorization Theory*. As in SIT, the concept of SCT holds that self-other differentiation is the driving force behind any kind of identity formation. In addition, however, Turner and other proponents of SCT are especially concerned about how the cognitive processes of 'othering' actually affect and facilitate certain kinds of behaviour within and collective action of a particular group.⁶⁶ It is primarily this focus on the effect of self-categorization for *intragroup* behaviour that makes SCT an especially valuable conversation partner for anyone seeking to reflect on the conduct, attitude, and self-understanding of free churches as collective selves opposed to relevant others.

There is one area of self-categorization research that seems to be of special relevance for our purposes, namely that of category salience. The concept of category salience implies that a group does not only have one self, but many group selves and that these group selves come to the fore depending on different comparative contexts. In other words, 'the salience of identity is highly contingent on the social context, and can shift quite quickly as the context changes'.⁶⁷ A particular person may see herself primarily as a woman (as opposed to present men), in another context as belonging to a group of teachers (as opposed to present nurses) or as a Dutch citizen (as opposed to a group of Germans)—in each case a different group category is salient, i.e., that of gender, profession or nationality. It thus becomes apparent that not every kind of perceivable difference between groups has a bearing on the process of identity formation. Rather, 'in-groups do not compare themselves with every cognitively available out-group: the out-group must be perceived as a relevant comparison group. Similarity, proximity, and situational salience are among the variables that determine out-group comparability, and pressures toward in-group distinctiveness should increase as a function of this comparability'.⁶⁸ This is to say that anyone interested in processes of identity formation must ask *which*

⁶⁵ Tajfel, 'La Catégorisation sociale', pp. 293-295, quoted and translated in Turner, 'Social comparison and social identity', pp. 7-8.

⁶⁶ John C. Turner, et al., *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 50.

⁶⁷ Russell Spears, 'Group Identities: The Social Identity Perspective', in Seth J. Schwartz et al. (eds), *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research: Structures and Processes* [vol. 1] (New York: Springer, 2012), p. 209.

⁶⁸ Tajfel and Turner, 'The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior', pp. 16-17.

between-group comparison becomes salient and thus effective in any given context. However, assuming that meaningful comparisons are not always automatically generated, one may also ask whether any given cognitive social categorization (i.e., in-group/out-group differentiation) is actually appropriate in the context at hand. In other words, should a different social category (or out-group) become salient because it is more relevant given the comparative context? Finally, the findings regarding identity salience also suggest that the identity of a group is influenced by or changes if another social category becomes salient. Again, '[a]s the "other" with whom we compare ourselves changes so does our "self"'.⁶⁹ Thus, the cognitive identification of a contextually salient out-group becomes highly relevant since it has a bearing on the beliefs and values, behaviour and action of our own group (i.e., it indirectly influences our collective identity). It is here that our considerations about free church origins and the results of social psychology actually merge and point towards some significant implications for free church praxis today.

5. Conclusion and Possible Implications for Free Church Identity and Mission Today

We have tried to show that the classical free churches in Germany emerged in a context of 'enduring Christendom'. It seems, however, that this feature of free church origins is frequently overlooked by those concerned with questions of current free church identity and mission.⁷⁰ When it comes to their ecclesiological identity, we concluded that free church communities and denominations defined themselves to a significant degree as antitypes to the mainline church. This is to say that collective identity was generated, both consciously and unconsciously, through a process of ecclesiological differentiation. Being an alternative model of church, ecclesial demarcation was an essential part of the fabric of free churches and they were nourished, as it were, by continually stressing structural, ethical or confessional differences. In this respect, the social psychological insights outlined above serve as a helpful framework to understand more deeply the mechanisms of free church identity formation. In terms of social identity research, we may say that, historically, the people's church within a still significantly Christianized environment was not only a necessary counterpart, but indeed the relevant and thus salient out-group for free churches. In other words, it was the surrounding nominal Christianity that gave meaning to free church

⁶⁹ Stephen Reicher et al., 'The Social Identity Approach in Social Psychology', in Margaret Wetherell and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Identities* (London: Sage, 2010), p. 54.

⁷⁰ Yet, see Stefan Paas, *Church Planting in Secular Europe: A Critical Analysis* [forthcoming], chapter 2.5.5., whose reference to the collapse of the 'whole background culture of Christianization' inspired the title of this article.

existence as well as direction to its ecclesial and missional praxis. If it is, indeed, true that a group's own (social) identity and attitude is informed and affected by the 'collective other' from whom it sets itself apart, we need to be aware that convictional communities have a 'historic track record' of being the church and doing mission mainly by comparison with, distinction from, and rejection of mainline Christianity.

At the same time, we concluded that free churches could benefit to a significant degree from inter-church traffic (i.e., already revived Protestants joining their congregations) and it also became obvious that the religious conditions of the nineteenth century as well as the contemporary ecclesial realities were, in several ways, a suitable breeding ground for the free church movement. In this sense, the existing people's church context provided important points of reference for free church mission, so that it is fair to say that both mainline churches as well as the enduring Christendom structures they supported, were not only 'enemies' but, ironically, 'allies' as well. In sum, S. Paas says it well:

The churches that resulted from their [i.e. the free church movements'] mission were not Christian communities in a non-Christian world, but they were intensive Christian communities in a culturally Christian world. (...) Turning from "nominal" to "regenerated" Christianity meant not a change of religion (despite all the rhetoric), but a deeper experience of what one actually believed all along.⁷¹

Thus, despite obvious reflexes of rejection and differentiation, free church communities emerged and developed in what we may call a 'paradoxical symbiosis' with nominal Christianity in a still thoroughly Christianized culture.

The possible implications of these findings become clearer once we realize that these ecclesial and cultural conditions no longer exist in an increasingly secular Europe.⁷² Most European societies, including Germany, have transitioned into an era of post-Christendom, '[a] culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitely shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence'.⁷³ In such a Post-Christendom age it can no longer be assumed that people know what Christianity is, let alone that they have a basic understanding of the Christian story or share common Christian concepts and vocabulary. At the same time, we are witnessing a rapid decline of mainline Christianity. What could still be called a comprehensive people's church in the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century is now less defined by a large number of nominal

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² See, e.g., McLeod and Ustorf (eds), *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe. 1750-2000*.

⁷³ Murray, *Post-Christendom*, p. 19.

members than by a small number of those who gather 'voluntarily' and 'by conviction'. It is within this changed context that free churches have to develop their ecclesial identity and missional concepts.

Now, evidently, this changed context in which free churches are called to operate today has to be perceived as an essential challenge to the relevance of any out-group that has hitherto functioned as the 'comparative counterpart' in the process of identity formation. It is no longer a viable option to determine one's ecclesial identity in opposition to other Christian groups within the sphere of a Christendom culture. Nominal Christianity has naturally been the most relevant reference group for a long time, but not anymore. Given the new post-Christian context, it now seems more fitting for free churches to consciously position themselves not in opposition to mainline Christianity but in reference to their increasingly secular surroundings. Assuming the missional self-conception of the free church movement in general, there is little point in adhering to traditional processes of identity formation and mission which continue to focus on what has in the meantime become a minority of nominal Christians without taking account of those thoroughly secularized people that make up the vast part of the population. An inherited, revivalist *modus operandi* that is primarily geared towards turning a constantly dwindling group of nominal Christians into committed followers of Christ becomes increasingly obsolete. Rather, since the 'Christianized other' has collapsed, as it were, it seems that, contextually, a more 'secular other' ought to be the most salient social category and should as such influence the collective identity and missional praxis of free churches in a Post-Christendom age.

Finally, I suggest that free church theorists and practitioners seeking to address the aforementioned missional and ecclesial identity crisis cannot afford to ignore these cognitive (and emotional) processes. This being said, it seems, for example, that free churches still frequently exhibit an ongoing rhetoric of differentiation from mainline Christianity despite the fact that such rhetoric is far from self-evident in our current cultural context. Yet, an additional feature of social psychological research may explain the apparent difficulties to relate to a more relevant counterpart for social comparison and identity formation. It has been maintained within SCT that 'a given category is more likely to become salient to the extent that a perceiver is psychologically predisposed to use it'.⁷⁴ Against this backdrop, it could be argued that for free churches the accumulated expertise in having long been a revivalist movement within Christendom structures is prone to result in a psychological inclination to regard mainline Christianity as the most salient category, regardless of a changed religious and cultural environment.

⁷⁴ Reicher et al., 'The Social Identity Approach in Social Psychology', p. 54.

Moreover, we have indicated that similarity and proximity are meaningful factors in determining out-group comparability. This is to say that we have a tendency to compare ourselves primarily with those whose beliefs, norms, attitudes and assumptions are not too distinct from ours. In turn, this might be a possible explanation for why contemporary free churches still tend to form their identity over against other Christian groups that are significantly similar and may thus be perceived as somewhat 'closer relatives'. Simultaneously, of course, these considerations would provide us with social psychological reasons for the seeming difficulty of free churches to develop an appropriate and sustainable ecclesial and missional identity in their post-Christian context. The challenge, it seems, has to do with the progressive disappearance of mainline Christianity as their conventional 'significant other', while another, more secular counterpart is not easily accessible at all, since secular groupings appear to be too different to readily function as 'real others'. This may go a long way towards explaining why free churches still seem to flourish more in regions with a strong revivalist history and thus in areas where there are already many churches to begin with.

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