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Post-secular rapprochement in peripheralized regions – politics of withdrawal and parish community responses

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Abstract. In many parts of Germany, processes of secularization overlap with ongoing sociodemographic changes such as outmigration and population decline. As a result, Christian churches face significant financial pressure due to plummeting numbers of parish members. In East Germany, these circumstances are aggravated by policies of de-Christianization during the socialist past. Using a case study in the Evangelical Church in Central Germany and its church district Altenburger Land, we argue that forms of post-secular rapprochement – transgression of boundaries of belief – develop following severe budget cuts and the withdrawal of pastoral positions. Contemporary literature on post-secular rapprochement specifically illuminates social issues emerging in urban landscapes due to neoliberal policies. In contrast, we highlight corresponding incidents of cooperation in peripheralized regions. On the one hand, parish members in our case study region aim to cooperate with local clubs to organize common festivities and increase their visibility. On the other hand, they attempt to get in touch with other Christian groups in a more subtle way. Hereby, we illuminate the everyday work of post-secular rapprochement in peripheralized regions using an empirically driven and practice–theory-based approach.

1 Introduction: interrogating the post-secular condition

The debate on the (post-)secular (see, e.g., Eder, 2002) has had a profound impact on the geography of religion and numerous studies discussing implications and empirical findings under the impression of an alleged post-secular condition. However, several scholars rightfully noted that the debate about the (post-)secular often leaves the realm of empirically grounded arguments (see Beckford, 2012:13). As a symptom of that, some works attempted to contribute general assumptions about the nature of the (post-)secular (see, e.g., McLennan, 2010). However, for empirically engaged researchers these works can hardly serve as fundament for further conceptualization.

The concept of post-secular rapprochement (e.g., Cloke, 2010) fills this deficit: it explicitly contrasts debates on abstract understandings of post-secularity that seem to have "outpaced empirical questions of the practical dynamics of postsecular rapprochement" (Williams, 2015:195f.) in directly approaching observable transgressions of boundaries of belief. Such transgressions are seen to intentionally hap-

pen in the public sphere and aim to address certain broad social issues of inequality or injustice. While studies often identify post-secular rapprochement in urban regions, we argue that it becomes relevant in rural communities, too, due to challenges posed by neoliberal policies of governing that create specific social issues due to unemployment and outmigration.

This article is situated at the juncture of geography of religion and peripheralization research. It applies the concept of post-secular rapprochement to socio-spatial conditions of outmigration, demographic decline and unemployment in a rural and small-town region in Eastern Germany – the district of Altenburger Land in Thuringia (ABGL). Here, such forms of cooperation seem to blur boundaries both between different Christian faith-based communities (Evangelical, Baptist, Catholic) and between Christian faith-based communities and the locals without church affiliation. In doing so, we plea for expanding the concept of post-secular rapprochement from its narrow focus on the city because it is not "the city" that fosters post-secular rapprochement but rather perceived needs to act and react to certain conditions. Empir-

ically, we identify forms of post-secular rapprochement in the wake of regional economic and demographic pressure. This pressure does not only affect the region in general. Instead, specifically the local church parishes have had to cope with both long-lasting de-Christianization in socialist times and a recent neoliberal-informed process of parish restructuration that have led to the withdrawal of church services in the Evangelical Church of Central Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Mitteldeutschland, EKM).

As one consequence, parish members have sought to build relations to other Christian communities and local clubs. We will show that given the restricted situation, such transgressions of boundaries of belief are symptoms of coping with socioeconomic deprivation and the resulting local social issues that originate from the intersection between general processes of socioeconomic polarization and societal secularization.

First, we will summarize the discussion on the post-secular condition with a special emphasis on recent geographic works that have stressed the relevance of local articulations of the post-secular. Second, we will detail the situation in our case study region with regard to recent changes in the pastoral presence of the EKM. In a third step, we will discuss on recent cases of post-secular rapprochement within ABGL.

2 Geographic perspectives on post-secular rapprochement

Scrutinizing the recent debate on post-secularity in geography, Beckford (2012:6) claims that "Cultural geographers and other spatially oriented scholars have been in the forefront of research on the new or revitalized presence of faith-based organizations in welfare states." Despite these efforts, some scholars note that assumptions about religion coming back from an alleged former public marginality may have been rather misleading (e.g., Olson et al., 2013:1422). Others are opposed to the notion that something "new" emerges and stress that "while much of the earlier geographical research on religion (...) did not use the language of postsecularism, it was clear that in numerous contexts the engagement of sacred and secular was not 're-emerging' but rather continuing" (Kong, 2010:764).

Furthermore, a variety of understandings of post-secular, post-secularity, post-secularism has surfaced, resulting in a multifaceted and shifting meaning of the terms. Olson et al. (2013:1422) claim that

> "postsecularization refers to the reemergence of religion in the public sphere, whereas postsecularism is associated with a normative position regarding the involvement of religious people, organizations, and ethics in public life."

Consequently, Olson et al. devote themselves to post-secular theory as "a set of diverse scholarship that shares an interest in the development of a rigorous critique of theories of secularization" (Olson et al., 2013:1422).

However, oscillating between universal attempts of explanation and particular efforts of building an empirical and conceptual fundament, the debate has often bypassed the realm of empirical analysis (Beckford, 2012:13). This has been fostered by contributions on "the post-secular" that rely on de-contextualizing narratives (see, e.g., Eder, 2002). There are, however, a number of studies that address post-secularity as an *empirical* phenomenon related to changing relations of religion within a secular society (e.g., Olson et al., 2013:1424). Lancione (2014:3063) identifies different strands of research in geography, highlighting that one of them – in line with a statement by Olson et al. (2013:1424) about it being the key focus for geographers – is concerned with incidents of crossing the boundaries between secular and religious orientation in the public arena. Often based on examples from the UK and USA (but also in Turkey; see Gökariksel and Secor, 2015), such "new forms of partnership between the religious and the secular" (Cloke et al., 2016:498) have been termed post-secular rapprochement (see Cloke, 2010).

In a time in which several scholars diagnose a renewal of interest of geographers of religion in religious practices, or "lived religion" (see Dwyer, 2016:3; also Tse, 2014; Sutherland, 2017), post-secular rapprochement apparently has become a concept covering a variety of observed forms of religious practices. Moreover, it breaks the abstract concept of post-secularism down to "a series of emergent spaces of rapprochement" (Cloke and Beaumont, 2013:32). Less a homogeneous phenomenon, theses spaces are understood as specific, heterogeneous incidents of cooperation. Consequently, conceptualizations set off inductively from empirical observations: forms of rapprochement emerge from collaboration between social groups with different religious and secular orientation (see Olson et al., 2013:1424). However, this is not to plea for empirical eclecticism but to develop "a more wholesale reorientation of the sacred and secular in the public sphere" (Cloke, 2011:486). In fact, it grasps forms of "crossing over" (Cloke and Beaumont, 2013:28) that are

> "formed around an apparent willingness for secular, faith-based and inter-faith interests to enter into partnerships to work together on key ethical issues, even if it means setting aside some fundamental theological and moral differences in the process." (Cloke, 2011:486)

Though post-secular rapprochement is not a priori limited to a certain quality or interest, it is often applied to practices that express a willingness to overcome differences or discriminatory societal or political frames but to different extents (see, e.g., Ehrkamp and Nagel, 2014).

Besides motifs for interaction, scholars also address the problems of interactions between formerly divided groups:

> "Rapprochement emerges from the negotiation of existing secular and religious divisions – a pro-

cess that by nature holds the possibility of en-
trenching existing religious and secular identity
boundaries as much as fostering new relations of
mutual translation across secular/religious bound-
aries." (Williams, 2015:200f.)

Aimed at intervening into existing social conditions, rap-
prochement has to be conceptually addressed as a situated
and socially complex phenomenon for which different moti-
vations and extents of willingness play an important role. For
instance, Ehrkamp and Nagel (2014) specifically interrogate
up to which extend Christian churches in the USA are willing
and able to help undocumented immigrants because "shared
faith, in this case, does little to successfully counter preju-
dice against those perceived as other" (Ehrkamp and Nagel,
2014:323). They dissect how religious groups may be "con-
nected to rather than removed from the racialized discourses
and a regional political culture that prioritizes the rule of law
on immigration matters" (Ehrkamp and Nagel, 2014:324).

From a conceptual perspective, Cloke and Beaumont
(2013:28) illuminate how differences in "theological, polit-
ical and moral principles" are overcome by faith-based or-
ganizations in the Netherlands and UK, such as the House
of Hope. They stress that these forms of "crossing over"
are usually publicly visible but emerge from aforementioned
complex conditions and in complex ways. This notion of
complexity and heterogeneity has proved to be a common
starting point for numerous scholars, e.g., leading Gökarik-
sel and Secor (2015:24) to ask "how different religious and
nonreligious ways of being in the world interact – through
what idioms, constituting what kinds of spaces, in conflict or
cooperation – within a diverse polity".

Furthermore, rather than focusing institutional and or-
ganizational programmatic declarations, "fresh expressions
of partnership between faith-motivated and other people"
(Cloke et al., 2016:498f.) have become an empirical focal
point, for example in the case of "occupy" movements in the
UK and USA. Though incidents of "crossing over" between
Christian and secular groups dominate the debate, efforts
of transgressions have also been observed between different
systems of belief (Cloke, 2011). Post-secular rapprochement
thus allows for grasping the multitude of beliefs that may
differ individually, while resisting the urge to transpose any
findings into the limited Christian/secular scope of the cur-
rent debate (see Cloke and Beaumont, 2013:29).

Notably, moments of post-secular rapprochement are often
identified in the third sector, with Williams et al. (2012:1480)
assuming them to be byproducts of attempts to establish "less
expensive forms of government". Whilst common grounds
for initiatives of post-secular rapprochement may be, rhetor-
ically, constituted by the radical otherness of neoliberal log-
ics (see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), they are heterogeneous,
ambiguous and often contested. Consequently, Williams et
al. (2012:1480) regard neoliberal logics as only one factor
among others rather than a forceful cause of rapprochement.

Instead, the specific relation between religions, ethical issues
and social as well as spatial justice has become a key concern
of several scholars (e.g., Cloke et al., 2010, 2016; Williams
et al., 2012).

Emerging from common grounds of "key ethical issues"
(Cloke, 2011:486), "urban social issues" (Beaumont, 2008)
or "crucial social issues" (Cloke and Beaumont, 2013:28),
post-secular rapprochement is often situated in the "the pub-
lic arena" (Cloke and Beaumont, 2013:28), e.g., on Tahrir
Square in the process of the Egyptian Revolution united
in their fight against the political regime (Mavelli, 2012).
Putting it more generally, yet in line with the general as-
sumptions of the aforementioned statements, a number of
studies essentially highlight questions of social or spatial
justice (e.g., Cloke et al., 2010; Conradson, 2008; Beau-
mont and Dias, 2008). Motivations, thus, may be interpreted
as forms of resistance against subjection (e.g., Cloke et al.,
2016; Williams et al., 2012). These issues seem to be related
to feelings of loss, e.g., in cases of withdrawal of support
by state institutions (Williams, 2015:194) following "the ne-
oliberal shrinkage of the formal state" or "regimes of aus-
terity welfare" (Cloke et al., 2016:499). Empirical research,
accordingly, often presupposes the neoliberal condition as

"the current mix of neoliberal governance and
postpolitical public engagement [. . .] opening out
opportunities for professional and voluntary partic-
ipation that transcends previously divisive bound-
aries of involvement between religious and secular
motivation" (Cloke and Beaumont, 2013:28).

Spatiality is a key concern in that regard. Bartolini et al.
(2017) – implicitly regarding the rural as being more resis-
tant to modernization – assert that formal religion becomes
undermined by economic, social and geographic processes
which is why religion may still thrive in rural places. Ana-
logically, Wilford's (2010) concept of "sacred archipelagos"
highlights that, due to secular differentiation, religions in
Western contexts have become increasingly confined to cer-
tain, metaphorically speaking, islands – small towns, rural
regions, suburban areas, cities – "in the secular oceans of
modernity" (Bartolini et al., 2017:340). In contrast to Wil-
ford's thesis on religious retreats to archipelagos, researchers
often consider the urban and its public sphere to be the
quintessential site for the future relevance and shapes of reli-
gion: they are "the geographical testing ground where ques-
tions of the continued vitality and validity of religion are rou-
tinely assessed." (Bartolini et al., 2017:341). As Bartolini et
al. (2017:341) rightly acknowledges, this leads to a certain
tension between Wilford's position "that religion persists in
personal beliefs, in families and in communities" and Beau-
mont's and Baker's notion (2011) of a radical shift of religion
towards a more public relevance. However, it can be stated
that there is a general tendency to take the city as the locus
of social change and invention newly fostered by neoliberal-
ism (with the city as one central gateway of globalization),

which in turn creates pressures of social injustice, deprivation and impoverishment (Cloke and Beaumont, 2013:32). As a consequence, the city is identified as *the* site where post-secular rapprochement emerges (Cloke and Beaumont, 2013:32). Complex entities such as cities *encompass* different landscapes and places of worship (that have sometimes been rebranded; see della Dora, 2016), and they are also sites where certain social issues emerge and thus encourage potential transgressions of boundaries of belief to address them in the public space (Cloke and Beaumont, 2013:28). However, "the city" or "the urban" itself has rather limited (and highly problematic) explanatory value for social phenomena: they can refer to places *where* something occurs yet do not explain *why* that would be the case.

Societal change, instead, takes different forms at different sites. Socioeconomic processes such as individualization, labor mobility and globalization have been – as Wilford rightfully argues from the vantage point of a geography of religion – performed through spatial processes such as urbanization that create new and complex socio-spatial dependencies (see Naumann and Fischer-Tahir, 2013). Treating the urban and rural a separate spheres of the social would be, therefore, a misleading reductionism and reification. Outside metropolitan areas, however, societal change might be associated to different phenomena such as population decline, deindustrialization, unemployment, rural outmigration and (infra)structural adjustment neglects. Moreover, rural regions may be disadvantaged with regard to their representation in the media (see Dando, 2009) and spatial stigmatization (see Meyer et al., 2016) actively contributing to socio-spatial reification. However, while the urban–rural dichotomy does simplify the more fluid space and draws administrative, lifestyle-related or discursive boundaries, given the global condition, the destinies of both are closely entwined: while cities may be "machines of modernity" and secularization (Bartolini et al., 2017:341), the effects of both are not confined to them but instead create different effects at different sites.

Agreeing with the statement by Bartolini et al.(2017:342) that "religion's geographies are less tied to spaces of the personal, the family and the community than to the very real struggles of, and over, place and space in modernity", we argue that proclaiming the city as *the* place of post-secular rapprochement falls short of understanding the specific overlapping effects of secularization and processes of peripheralization such as population decline and withdrawal of services in rural regions (see Miggelbrink and Meyer, 2014). Drawing on the notion that spatial categories can be categories of observation, but not of explanation, we side with authors such as Tse (2014:202) to specifically focus on "performative practices of place-making informed by understandings of the transcendent." We investigate these practices through the lens of how outmigration, neoliberal restructuring and secularization overlap and create the seedbed for acts and attempts of post-secular rapprochement in rural regions. Those parts of Germany that formerly belonged to the GDR (German Democratic Republic) are prime examples of such complex conditions due to their history of state practices of de-Christianization and economic deprivation after German reunification. In the next chapter, we will show how those processes have created an especially conflictive situation for many Christian communities in the German rural district Altenburger Land.

3 Parish restructuration under (demographic) pressure

The Altenburger Land[1] is a church district formerly located within the GDR and now part of the free state of Thuringia. The GDR actively promoted de-Christianization through an atheist education and religion policy (see Heise, 1993:136). Although the initial stages of GDR's history were characterized by open conflict, the persistence of the GDR led to attempts of restricted cooperation by Christian churches and the government to prevent further oppression (see Mau, 2005). In the 1980s, however, church institutions became the main proponents of the peace movement in the GDR, some of them subsequently gaining more and more societal influence (see Silomon, 1999:57ff.). However, the number of Christians is assumed to have shrunk from more than 90 % shortly after the Second World War to barely 25 % in 1988 (Heise, 1993:136).

The regional church EKM to which the church district belongs resulted from a fusion of two formerly separate regional German evangelical churches in 2009. This merger aimed to increase administrative efficiency and secure their future existence (see Hübner, 2014:12f.) despite the plummeting number of members. These large-scale changes were mirrored by small-scale developments, as several church districts underwent mergers as well (see Meyer and Miggelbrink, 2015a:10).

At least two crucial demographic developments can be identified as key conditions leading regional church organizations to seek fortune in restructuration: firstly, the ABGL – as many regions in Eastern Germany – has suffered from severe population losses, a relatively high number of unemployed, a weak economic performance, an ageing population as well as selective outmigration of mainly young skilled people (see Meyer and Miggelbrink, 2015b). Some regions of the district have lost more than 25 % of their population between 2000 and 2010. Secondly, the number of people identifying themselves as Christian has significantly dropped in Germany. Given that the Catholic and Evangelical churches both are forwarded the state incomes from the "church tax", this has had direct influence on church budgets. In other words: the ABGL's population decreases in

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[1]The name Altenburger Land refers both to a county of Thuringia and to a church district of the EKM, which are not entirely identical in terms of territory. In this paper, by Altenburger Land we refer to the church district if not indicated otherwise.

total – leading to lower numbers of people paying church taxes, donations, etc. – and the number of Christians decreases in relative numbers, thus catalyzing the effects of the population decline. As a consequence, the number of parish members has decreased significantly, e.g., often surpassing a 20 % decline locally between 2008 and 2011. In essence, the theological burdens of 40 years of a politically intended de-Christianization in the GDR (see Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, 2011) merged with ongoing processes of secularization and demographic change. In 2011, a new financial law of the EKM (see EKM, 2011) directly responded to these conditions by redistributing incomes and expenditure. Based on a paradigm of spatial solidarity among the church districts, it promotes additional funding for rural districts. As a result, in 2013, the church district Altenburger Land (with about 17 400 church members spread over 13 parishes with 261 settlements in 2011, some of them with less than 10 church members) could finance 25 staff positions (comprising pastors, administrative staff and other staff such as cantors and pedagogues). In comparison, of 58 pastors in 1993, only 17 were left in 2013.

The Altenburger Land is not an exception; it exemplifies challenges that many rural and small town regions in Eastern Germany face due to the simultaneity of demographic decline and secularization. While the question whether this represents a problem in several post-socialist countries can be a matter of empirical enquiry in the future, the ABGL is nevertheless an example of challenges following secular policies *in* socialist countries. However, these issues are not restricted to the EKM. Instead, most regional evangelical churches and Catholic dioceses in Germany have introduced restructuration initiatives commonly motivated by the need to cope with stagnating numbers of parish members and tax incomes. Notwithstanding such rationalizations, cutting pastoral positions down to 30 % within 20 years (off of what was taken for granted through 40 years of restrictions and resistance) has had profound ramifications in practice and with respect to the subject's perceptions and interpretation, as we have showed extensively elsewhere (Miggelbrink and Meyer, 2014:305ff.). Currently, the relation between the voluntary parish members and staff members of the church district was strained by increased workloads in addition to decreased local presence of the pastors. Given the rapid down-spiralling dynamics in a system that has been seen to resist even the most invasive state politics, discussions about budget plans and restructuration were emotionally laden and have led to several conflicts about pastoral positions being cut despite the presence of locally active parish members. However, these developments also gave rise to other reactions: some have questioned the validity and authority of church organizations for the individual's belief in general (Meyer and Miggelbrink, 2015a:25). However, others – after initial resignation following the loss of the local pastor due to budget cuts – experienced growing activism with regard to self-reliantly organizing festivities and communal activi-

ties in the local parishes and sometimes in cooperation with other local groups such as volunteer fire departments (VFDs) or sports clubs.

4   Methodology

The following analysis discusses forms of cooperation between parish members of the church district ABGL and, firstly, people without church affiliation and, secondly, other Christian groups. Drawing on practice theory (see Everts et al., 2011), we focus on actual practices of cooperation, their restrictions and evaluations by members of the local parishes. Empirically, our interpretation draws on research[2] conducted between 2013 and 2014 in the church district Altenburger Land. It consists of 3 focus groups and 14 interviews with pastors and staff members of the church district as well as the EKM. Furthermore, we conducted seven focus groups and three interviews with members of the local parishes mainly focusing on individual engagement and lay positions. These conversations with, in sum, about 85 people mainly revolved around financial cuts and the effects of territorial reorganization on their work. Initially, our participants were encouraged to elaborate on their perception of the recent developments and how they cope with it. The conversations, however, often took turns towards intense debates about organizational mistakes and appropriate measures to counter the impact of demographic changes. All conversations were transcribed, anonymized and analyzed following Mayring's approach of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014) using the software MaxQDA.[3]

5   Transgressing belief boundaries in rural Eastern Germany

Parish restructuration has taken its toll in ABGL. Not surprisingly, staff members of the EKM as well as pastors and members of the parishes were usually opposed to the financial cutbacks and personnel reductions (see Miggelbrink and Meyer, 2014). They often rejected a perceived invasion of what they regarded an *external* logic different to the one they assume to be genuine for "the church" and Christian faith. Such foreign logics were characterized as mainly economic, capitalist and from West Germany after the reunification. However, most of them do acknowledge the need to cut expenses in the course of declining numbers of parish members. However, in their attempts to cope with the resulting withdrawal

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[2]The empirical work was conducted under the auspices of the research project "anonymized". The topic "parish restructuration" was one of several fields of research that aimed to understand the relation between discourses about a region suffering from economic and demographic disadvantages and their impact on the livelihood of its inhabitants.

[3]In the following chapters, we will use excerpts of the transcripts and refer to them with their cipher and line.

of services, pastors and what they see as appreciation, most of them sensed the need to unite in the face of sociodemographic changes that cannot be rolled back.

5.1　Cooperation with local clubs in the municipality

As parish members expected the church to distance itself from neoliberal thinking, any re-organization based on economic calculation contradicts popular notions of the alleged organic relation between local communities in villages and "their" church. This bond is not limited to church members but developed between the administrative municipality, the – mainly atheist – village community and the parish. This idea of "locality" was taken up by a local pastor in an interview:

> "There is this saying: there is light again in the vicarage! And every villager is relieved! And in contrast, if there is no one, it's a loss. It's not about everyone participating in the parish, everyone attending the masses or really being in need of a pastor. It is something on a more subtle level." (lnt_19:80)

Being rarely contemplated, such widely shared statements and the opinions involved are the background for any evaluation of changes to these local regimes. However, it is the symbolic value of pastors for rural communities that is mirrored in such quotes: losing the pastor becomes another sign of drawback, marginalization and abandonment.

Parish members, in turn, do take notice of their low everyday relevance for their atheist fellow citizens. Therefore, they aim to increase their role in the local community facing financial and personnel losses:

> "If we were able to make our parish attractive again through our activities … That is what we are currently trying, organizing events ourselves, being visible locally, as a community. And if we increase the church's appeal (…) maybe our numbers will at least not decrease. (…) And the best thing happening would be someone saying 'I want to join the church, here'." (FG_03:582)

Such visions, however, are just one possible outcome of reflexive processes in the wake of budget cuts and member losses and they seem to be paradoxical: the parish members extensively complained about the need to organize the parish's administration on their own due to the regional church and the church district withdrawing support from them by cutting the pastoral position after the last pastor left. Conflicts emerged between the institutions and actors involved and the parish community had to offset the pastor's loss, thus beginning to organize festivities and congregations on their own. In turn, such a display of independence was hailed by some pastors:

> "Evangelization is only possible in such ways. Or they could offer private tuition for pupils whose

parents cannot afford expensive tutors, for free. (…) Maybe someone is good in the German language, or is a teacher, and agrees to do it in the parish hall. So that others recognize it. (…) And then they become curious and one day are willing to join." (Int_24:157)

Though met with suspicion, such views were welcomed by parish members as it provided a proactive vision in contrast to the frequent debates in the face of unwanted cuts. Under these circumstances, even the smallest success might trigger hopes to revert the decline: having had lost their pastoral position recently, one parish community organized a summer festival. A good attendance and the fact that the homemade cake sold out pretty early in the afternoon was taken as a sign for the event's popularity: "It has become better than we could ever have dreamed possible" (FG_10, 594). Such observations were mainly shared by members of the organization committee who saw the event also as a bold statement opposed to the church's alleged ignorance of the parish's vitality.

However, others came to different conclusions. One (of only a few) confirmand had organized a small behind-the-scenes tour through the church. However, on his first attempt, nobody opted to take part in that tour. Only after finding the support of older parish members was he able to attract several people. However, he complained about them belonging to an older generation (despite his hopes of spreading interest to the younger generation). Young members of the local VFD, he disappointedly admitted, "just made stick bread and weren't interested in anything else, also because their parents didn't really care" (Int_30, 15).

In contrast to such observations, the organizers from the parish community clung to hope:

> "There are some weak regions that have gained parish members coming out of such plights. I know it from a pastor I'm friends with. They had a similar situation; the pastor was gone. There were people joining church, numbers rose, and they were eventually able to afford a pastor again. It was a grassroots effort." (FG_03:455)

Such singular observations – visions, hopes and disappointments – are the entities of what, on a larger scale, may be called effects of parish restructuration. No matter how unrealistic such hopes are, they are the driving forces for efforts of cooperation within the local communities, despite the differences. Moreover, there is a sense that all communities in rural regions face common problems and may support each other:

> "The VFD is the place where men come together, women as well, in these abandoned regions, bringing people together, uniting with the church parish. (…) Even people not belonging to the church, and

people from the VFD, parish members or not, support the church during work efforts and organize festivities together." (Int_26:194)

Apparently in this case, one condition of cooperation is the perceived shared fate of being subjected to decline. Whereas some parishes seem to have been surprised by the ramifications of these conditions, other local groups were frequently regarded to have had proper time to get accustomed to it:

"Those also involved elsewhere, in sports clubs, the VFD, have a better sense of the problem. They experience demography elsewhere. They know that you have to stick together." (FG_05:183)

In the eyes of the parish members, such instances of "sticking together" aimed to increase the visibility of the parish and, more strategically, were directed towards the church district and regional church: the parish members had hoped to demonstrate their regional church that the decision to deny them "their" pastoral position was wrong, using a well-attended – yet comparably small-scale – summer festival as manifestation *and* publicly visible symbol of a lively community. Moreover, parish members showed pride that this all was reached against the regional church's headwind. Having created interest with the support of the VFD – which was in charge of technical support, beverages and meals – was thought of as a positive signal.

In historic comparison, such cooperation – though locally sometimes perceived to be innovative – can be assumed to be a revival of the former annual *Kermesse* (*Kirchweihfest*, church consecration festival) that was usually organized by the local parishes but supported by other local groups. Despite these local key events, cooperation can also be subtler:

"We wanted to have a small congregation on Ascension Day. And we chose to have it at 10:00, so everyone interested in a bratwurst afterwards can go to events of the VFD, so we won't get in each other's way." (Int_22:351)

However, not every parish member was sympathetic to cooperation with the VFD. One female member, and mother of a younger parish member, explicitly expressed her distaste of festivities involving them:

"There are festivities organized by the VFD? They are collective drinking binges. VFD events in general. Many go there; you can celebrate all night. But it is not really a community." (Int_30:539)

Such a pessimistic opinion was mentioned in various conversations (sometimes football club festivities were considered equally alcohol driven). An active parish member of another village shared further insights into the entanglement of parish community and VFD:

"I think the community life in the parish is not really noticed from outside. (...) If I were to go to

our VFD, one of the local communities, and ask them about the last time they've been to church, I wouldn't get the desired answer." (Int_22:299)

He continued to explain his attempts of maintaining his engagement in the parish community as well as in the VFD, yet admitted that – at one point – he stopped attending VFD activities on Sundays due to his involvement in the parish. He provided insights into his feelings about the social dimension of bringing together these two worlds:

"And you soon notice that – those workers don't have a certain class – they are the ones talking derogatively about the church. (...) You surely don't need to start a conversation with them about it; they stick to their opinion. (...) An atheist opinion, sometimes a national-socialist one." (Int_22:523ff.)

For him, the fact that the pastor responsible for his parish was only rarely seen was a gap he felt he himself had to fill. Despite his efforts of becoming a volunteer lector – able to hold a service yet not fully accepted by the parish members – he frequently complained about his pastor's absence. Transgressing borders in order to compensate for that was not a goal to be achieved but a burden that posed a (social) challenge.

5.2 Cooperation with other Christian groups

There are, however, more subversive forms of transgressing boundaries under the impression of budget and personnel cuts perceived to be devised by the organization of "church". Some parish members discussed whether to join a free church instead of remaining in an organization that was assumed to extort money from the local parish but failed to redistribute that money to create equal opportunities for practicing one's religion. Free churches, by contrast, were believed to be self-substituent, independent and, thus, closer to the demands of their members.

Such contemplations often happen on the grounds of perceptions of failed appreciation of the volunteers' parish work in contrast to the "rich" and "important" heads of the regional church. Given such perceived mismatches, the choice to become independent was latently tempting. Even pastors admitted the free churches' ability to address the needs and wants of the people, often resulting from a model of more direct participation in structural decisions. Whereas such matters are rarely talked about, some pastors have a sense of what is going on:

"I have a pretty active parish community. Sometimes during parish meetings I feel a bit expendable. They came to learn about free churches in their own village, taking them as examples. (...) They are quite community driven, bottom-up." (FG_05:151)

Pastors occasionally acknowledge the relevance and achievements of the free churches in order to avoid conflicts with their own flock, given the frequent admiration for the free churches' perceived absence of structural constraints. In one-on-one conversations, they often showed understanding for their parish members, admitting the severe impact of the debate on restructuration. In parishes that had just lost their pastor and were thus forced to get accustomed to a provisional pastor from a different parish, these pastors hardly refrained from stating their sympathy for the parish members' concerns, yet felt obliged to keep them in line and tried to explain the logic and reason for the regional church's and church district's decisions.

Parish members affected by restructuration tend to develop interest in alternative practices and forms of organization. Their central concern is mostly the perceived primacy and wealth of a superstructure "church" while their local community "down here" has to cope with drawbacks: either they have to tolerate their pastors having less and less time for their own community (resulting sometimes in services being held once a month, if at all) or they have to accept the loss of the local pastoral position in general and get used to a new, provisional, pastor or merge with other parishes from other villages (which, however, often share the same fate). Being disappointed by these dynamics, they start to think outside the box and take inspiration from outside their own system of belief. Usually, this is not seen as an intended provocation but rather as a logical conclusion of recent experiences. They do not question the validity of their belief but rather the belief's organizational framework. As such, free churches seem to have gained influence in the course of contemplating the congruence of one's beliefs with the organizational paths the church takes.

However, none of our respondents has actually made the move to "convert". They remained in an ambivalent state of taking inspiration, sometimes getting into contact with members from other Christian groups. During our fieldwork, we believed them to feel satisfied over the fact that now – after having to face the consequences of the budget cuts (and equalling them with the church's perceived absent interest for them as a Christian community) – they felt they had finally gained the attention of their provisional pastor:

> "It is pretty interesting: for last week's meeting, we invited a guest, a friend of mine from the Baptist community, a free church, you know. And suddenly, the pastor showed up. And now you can make up your own mind: was it reasonable interest or control of whom we had invited? The church's upper circles speak about ecumenism. But if we, at the bottom, invite someone from a fellow church – it is church too – they become suspicious." (FG_03:725)

Such transgressions are not confined to Protestants and free churches. A certain tolerance for and interest in theolog-

ical differences in times of organizational crisis is not only seen in the increased awareness of free churches. Instead, we observed a mutual acceptance of Catholics that attend Protestant festivities and services in the rural regions of the church district. In some parts, Catholic parish members suffer from similar circumstances with their pastors being too far away or too few masses taking place. Some attend Protestant services and congregations, even the weekly meetings, and are usually fully accepted. Pastors and other members of the church district often remain silent about it, while some welcome this opportunity for lived ecumenism.

On the local scale, these kinds of crossover can be assumed to have happened previously, especially in small communities. They, however, gain relevance in times that seem to pose common challenges to both dominant strands of Christian religion in Germany, given that Catholic churches also struggle with demographic change. However, there are limits:

> "Ecumenism is thwarted by the heads of the Catholic Church. We're not allowed to have a joint service on Sundays. (...) The practice of ecumenism in these regions, far away from Church, would be easier if it wasn't for the Catholic Church scotching things. (...) They are not allowed to attend our Eucharist, although they are told that this is the most important event. We allow them to come. We invite them gladly, they can attend our Eucharist. We wouldn't even rat on them." (Int_36:365ff.)

In regions that are shaped by significant population decline and the resulting social consequences for almost any social subsystem, cooperation seems reasonable. Not surprisingly, we were notified of the presence of Catholics at services, get-togethers or festivities. In no way have we been able to witness any alienation. The shared Christian faith and the interest to practice it with a pastor despite the peripheral situation were the common grounds that leveled differences. As of now, such transgressions of boundaries remain cautious attempts. However, there is the sense that if parish communities struggle, then they should refocus on certain core aspects, such as one's relation to God. Such inner reorientations provide the moral grounds for interrogating one's inner ties with institutional religion and contemplating the benefit of taking part in other Christian organizations.

Parish restructuration as such is, therefore, not the only organizational way to economically cope with demographic change. In the eyes of those most affected by it in their daily lives, it is interpreted as a neoliberal-informed attempt to cut costs on the backs of those people contributing the most. Withdrawing and redistributing services in rural regions due to (1) secularization and urbanization and (2) the insurgence of (what is perceived to be) capitalism into systems that are understood as being exempt from such profane logics, fundamentally shatters the relation between humans, their territorial ties and their spiritual home. In our case, such a thing

happens in peripheralized regions and triggers attempts to transgress boundaries between different systems of belief.

6 Discussion and conclusion

Our case study illuminates the contrast between the church's assumed exceptional role in society and the intrusion of neoliberal logics into the organization of the Evangelical Church. Following this, members of several parishes in the EKM felt alienated due to budgetary and personnel cuts. This led them to consider cooperation with other groups, some of them Christian and some of them without any church affiliation. Hereby, they aimed to retain, and sometimes revive, their parish despite the ubiquitous combination of secularization and demographic change. Core issues were, specifically, to cope with the ramifications of decline in local communities. More generally, some of these actions were deliberately aimed at countering the invasion of capitalism.

Some of this cooperation was intended to take place in the public; some of it was deliberately more subtle. For every form of cooperation, different public arenas were addressed: direct neighbors, the church, one's own parish community or the provisional pastor. Here, it is crucial to take the feeling of spatial, hierarchical and organizational marginality into account. Often, the small parish community in the hinterland of the Evangelical Church – despite being proclaimed as its backbone – was seen as the victim of the recent processes, thus generating momentum in order to enter cooperation. These forms of rapprochement are not new. Instead, they are often renewed forms of past cooperation. Only after having been confronted with set of factors such as secularization and sociodemographic decline, they became viable options for action again. In the face of a felt withdrawal of support (see Williams, 2015:194), post-secular rapprochement was a key response of local communities.

Given the differences that have to be overcome in the process, the means of post-secular rapprochement are fuzzy boundaries: for instance, Catholics cannot officially attend certain services, but their presence is not advertised publicly (see also Ehrkamp and Nagel, 2014). In contrast, the fact that different local communities come together was advertised regionally to create awareness – which in turn is in line with notions that rapprochement's key element is the public sphere (see, e.g., Olson et al., 2013:1424). In other cases, the manners and political orientations of members of the VFD were questioned, yet parish events were scheduled in such a way as to not interfere with their festivities. In communities with their backs against the wall, rapprochement does not draw new boundaries (see also Cloke, 2011:486). On the contrary, such cooperation attempts to abolish certain boundaries to increase the parish's influence, its sense of community and its visibility. These aspects highlight that rapprochement must not be regarded as general movement but, analogically to Cloke and Beaumont's postulate of a "series of emergent spaces of rapprochement" (Cloke and Beaumont, 2013:32), as a specific form of cooperation that is spatially and socially embedded. It is an intentional process that originates from the participants motivations. In other words: it is work that requires temporal and emotional resources (see Cloke, 2011:486).

Our case study is an empirically driven contribution to contemporary works on post-secular rapprochement: it involves conflictive transgressions between different systems of belief under the impression of the withdrawal of support. They address locally relevant issues related to spatial (and thus distributional) justice. Despite the focus on urban issues and faith-based organizations in post-secular geographic literature, neoliberal processes have inflicted damage in rural regions as well. And while urban social movements often receive wider coverage, it is in the hinterland in which the churches' everyday relevance for suffering communities is continuously renegotiated in practice. Following works on post-secular rapprochement, they are examples of religion serving as one popular *means* to address social issues after years of decline.

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