

Article

The Christian Community Hirt und Herde: The Development of a Religious Community from the German Empire to the Present Day

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Abstract

In 1894, a Christian revelation occurred in western Saxony through the weaver August Hermann Hain, who founded the Christliche Gemeinschaft Hirt und Herde (Christian Community Shepherd and Flock). In the 1910s, church and state authorities became aware of the new religious community and attempted to prevent its meetings. As a result of the pacifist and labor movement-inspired social attitudes of Hain and his followers, state authorities banned the public activities of Hirt und Herde in parts of the German Empire in 1916/17. Despite the ban, the community continued to grow and by 1925 was already the third-largest religious community in Saxony. In addition to the former kingdom of Saxony, people in Thuringia, northern Bavaria, and Czechoslovakia also professed their belief in the new doctrine at that time. With the death of August Hermann Hain in 1927 and the ban on the community by the National Socialists in 1933, the members of Hirt und Herde increasingly withdrew from public life into internal emigration. Despite being recognized as an official religious community in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Hirt und Herde remained below the radar of public perception. In recent years, however, the community has begun—albeit slowly—to open up to the new social realities of a modern, pluralistic society. Using the pluralism paradigm of Peter L. Berger, this article traces the genesis of the generally unknown religious community over the last 125 years. In addition to the historical development of the community, it provides an explanatory approach to the changes in its teachings and public appearance.

Keywords: Christliche Gemeinschaft Hirt und Herde; Germany; revealed religion; Christianity; GDR; National Socialism; pluralism; twentieth century



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1. Introduction

The American sociologist of religion Peter L. Berger, who in his early years was a staunch advocate of the secularization theory, increasingly questioned that theory in the final years of his career and distanced himself from it (Berger 1999). Berger had recognized—as had many other sociologists of religion—that the secularization of modern societies, as understood in the Western tradition, is not inevitable. The increasing loss of significance of religion in both the private and public spheres, as is particularly evident in parts of Europe, can therefore no longer be interpreted as an anthropological inevitability. As an alternative to the secularization theory postulated over decades, Berger presented his ideas on the concept of the development of religion in pluralistic societies shortly before his death (Berger 2015). Alongside Berger, a large number of other scholars now see in this

concept, on a theoretical level, the possibility of describing the development of religion in modern societies (see [Neumaier 2023](#), pp. 3–7). Berger himself attributes to pluralism in modernity—understood here in a normative sense—the significance of being “the primary challenge for every religious tradition and community” ([Berger 2015](#), p. 33).

In the following, I will use this concept of pluralization to explain the genesis of the Christliche Gemeinschaft Hirt und Herde (Christian Community Shepherd and Flock) over the past 125 years since its founding in 1894. This religious community, which today still comprises around 700 members and is found almost exclusively in the eastern German federal states of Thuringia and Saxony, has changed both its religious tradition and its public presence over the course of its existence. In my view, the changes within Hirt und Herde following the collapse of the socialist experiment in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) can best be explained by shifts toward a pluralistic society. This is not intended to be a theoretical examination of the concept of pluralization. Rather, it serves as a framework through which the changes in the Christliche Gemeinschaft Hirt und Herde—which will be described below—can be explained. Accordingly, this article deals exclusively with Hirt und Herde from the perspective of a substantive understanding of religion, viewing it as an organization rather than focusing on the individual beliefs of its members. Such an organization is characterized by its inherent sense of community, which in turn is enduring and not merely a short-term phenomenon.

Rather, the article aims to highlight internal and external changes in a religious community against the backdrop of different state systems in Germany: the German Empire until 1918, the democratic interwar period of the Weimar Republic between 1918 and 1933, the Nazi dictatorship of the Third Reich until May 1945, the socialist dictatorship of the GDR between 1949 and 1989 and the reunified Germany since 1990.

2. The Christian Community Hirt und Herde—An Overview of Research About It

Little is known in academic research—even less in the general public and certainly not at the international level—about the Christian community Hirt und Herde, which can be understood as a classic new revelation religion with a Christian background. The first publicly available information about the community can be found in so-called sect books, which began to appear increasingly from the 1920s onwards in Germany, but which often contained highly polemical contributions that tended toward negative exaggeration. Moreover, most of the authors of these ‘handbooks’ came from a Protestant church background, which is why quite a few entries contain an unmistakable bias. This includes, in particular, the book by [Scheurlen \(1930\)](#), which was published by various publishers until 1930 and reprinted several times. More nuanced in its description, yet still strongly theological, is the book by [Hutten \(1961\)](#) and the handbook by [Reller \(1978\)](#), which was written from a decidedly ecclesiastical perspective.

In 1956, theologian Joachim Jentsch wrote his Ph.D. thesis on the Christian community Hirt und Herde, but Jentsch did not publish his thesis, so that only a few typewritten copies of his doctoral thesis existed ([Jentsch 1956](#)). Due to the difficulty of accessing the few copies, reference is made below to those books and articles that refer to Jentsch but are more easily accessible. The author himself has extensively reviewed Jentsch’s Ph.D. thesis and checked the information contained therein. Jentsch attended meetings of the community for his research and relied on files that were accessible at the time, primarily church records. Even though this work provides some insights into the community, especially with regard to the years after the Second World War. But it is nevertheless a classic church-theological polemic. Jentsch’s aim was not to write a substantive analysis of a religious community according to the standards of modern religious history and in relation to doctrinal teaching,

but rather to assess Hirt und Herde from the perspective of the Protestant understanding of faith and, in quite a few places, even to condemn it.

In contrast, the article written by church historian Helmut Obst can be regarded as a largely neutral assessment of Hirt und Herde (Obst 2020, pp. 487–516). There are no significant changes in content between the article in the first edition of the book (Obst 1980, pp. 301–25) and the fourth edition from the year 2000. In this article, Obst describes in detail the historical development and theological worldview of the religious community. However, it should be noted that the theological doctrine outlined by Obst in some cases is no longer corresponds to the actual practice within the community at the time of the last edition of his book in 2000. For example, the cosmological doctrine of Hirt und Herde presented by Obst no longer plays a significant role in the religious instruction of members today.¹ On the one hand, this can be explained by the fact that Obst himself saw no need to adapt his article written twenty years earlier. On the other hand, Hirt und Herde does not publish its own writings on its own theology; religious knowledge is passed on exclusively by word of mouth. Due to the fact that the group finally withdrew from public life after the Second World War and has only responded to scientific inquiries again in recent years, Obst—in my opinion—did not have any newer information on the genesis of the community in order to adapt the content of his article for reprinting in 2000.

The relatively short article by Bautz (1992) in the second volume of the *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon* is equally neutral. However, Bautz relied on outdated literature such as that by Jentsch (1956) and Hutten (1961), which means that this article is not very informative in terms of content.

In 2003, Günter Hain, then director of Hirt und Herde, gave an interview to three students, which formed the basis for a short article in a handbook (Ebelt et al. 2003). In addition, short articles relating to the city of Leipzig appeared in subsequent years (Willenborg 2003; Albrecht and Paape 2009). However, these are purely informative in nature, referring to existing papers and information about Hirt und Herde, above all the aforementioned article by Obst (2020). Also with reference to Leipzig, an article was published in 2012 that dealt for the first time with the history of the Christian community Hirt und Herde during the Nazi era (Schuster 2012). Although it was already known that the community had been banned in 1933, the surveillance and persecution measures to which its members were subjected were traced for the first time in this article using the example of the Saxon city of Leipzig.

This research overview, which to the author's knowledge includes all relevant published works on the Christian community Hirt und Herde, clearly shows that relatively little is known about this Christian religious community. This is partly because the community has increasingly withdrawn from public life since the 1950s and its area of distribution in Germany (southwestern Saxony, northern Bavaria, and eastern Thuringia) lies outside of urban centers, which further inhibits its general visibility. On the other hand, researchers of the study of religions in German-speaking areas focus mainly on more well-known and often controversially discussed deviant groups.

Since the Christian community Hirt und Herde remains outside the general public's awareness and academic interest to this day, we will first summarize the context of its origins and its theological teachings. The subsequent historical development of the last 125 years will be linked to the political upheavals in Germany during this period. It should be noted that the main areas where Hirt und Herde is prevalent have undergone a strong secularization of society over the last 150 years. These developments, which have also affected Hirt und Herde, will not be directly addressed here. Instead, this article will focus on the community's actions in relation to the political changes mentioned above.

3. The Christian Community Hirt und Herde in Its Early Days

Saxony, a heavily industrialized state in eastern Germany, became one of the most important centers for Christian-influenced spiritualist associations and new revelations from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. Leipzig in particular, as an international trade fair city that was also home to a large number of publishing houses, became an important European center for religiously deviant groups in Europe (see [Edenheiser 2010](#); [Schuster and Bamert 2012](#); [Bigalke 2016](#); [Schuster 2018](#)). In addition, the industrial region in western Saxony, together with the mining-dominated Erzgebirge (Ore Mountains), was part of the region where a variety of religious communities were founded. In general, it can be said that the turn of the century was an era that saw the founding of a large number of new religions, beliefs, and concepts of lifestyle reform ([Graf 2004](#), p. 175).

On the one hand, the close connection between the Protestant regional churches in Germany and the respective ruling houses gave rise to a strong national Protestantism ([Tilgner 1970](#); [Greschat 1994](#)). On the other hand, the connection between the Protestant churches and the respective ruling houses led to the emergence of social and religious protest movements, most of which developed around charismatic leaders ([Obst 2020](#), p. 488). Charisma is understood here, according to Max Weber, as a supernatural or even God-sent leader who is attributed this supernatural quality by his followers ([Weber \[1921\] 2006](#), p. 243), which applies directly to the founder of Hirt und Herde. Accordingly, the recruitment of new members in the early years was based on personal contacts rather than on mass media such as books or magazines.

The social and cultural tensions of that time, caused by industrialization, urbanization, new scientific discoveries, and social differentiation, led to questions about the future viability of traditional church religious concepts. Those involved in life reform and religious renewal were concerned with nothing less than the all-encompassing ‘conversion’ of humanity in modern society, which was supposedly in an existential crisis ([Graf 2004](#), pp. 133–35).

August Hermann Hain (1848–1927), who had been strongly influenced by religion since childhood, was a weaver like his parents, grew up and was socialized in the West Saxon region described above. He joined a small spiritualist-chiliastic group in 1889, of which there were many at that time. During a prayer meeting on 23 November 1894, in which the leader of the circle announced, “Now the Lord and Savior is among us”. Hain revealed himself with the words, “It is me” (quoted from [Obst 2020](#), p. 492). In the following years, about which little is known, Hain presumably gained followers through his sermons in small Christian circles, thanks to his charisma and persuasiveness. August Hermann Hain did not write down a fixed theological doctrine but passed it on to his followers exclusively in oral form. Because the leaders who followed after Hain’s death in 1927 were not accorded the same position in the belief system of Hirt und Herde, they were no longer able to write down the religious worldview of the community themselves. Only August Hermann Hain, as a renewed revelation of God, would have had the authority to do so. For this reason, to this day, the entire proclamation of August Hermann Hain is passed on exclusively orally, which is why no writings by Hirt und Herde on their religious doctrine exist. The only exception is the statutes as a registered association (*Vereinssatzung*), which are legally required for the legal status as such an association.

4. The Theological Doctrine

August Hermann Hain did not see himself as the revelator of a new religion. He—and, in his tradition, the Christian community Hirt und Herde—claim to have merely reinterpreted biblical teachings. This self-image led to conflicts with the Protestant regional churches during August Hermann Hain’s lifetime, which is why Hain and his followers left

the respective regional churches en masse at the beginning of the 1920s. The followers of Hirt und Herde see Hain as another revelation of God to mankind. However, this revelation of God in August Hermann Hain—as there have been several before it, according to Hirt und Herde—does not have the same significance for human life as the revelation of God in Jesus, which is regarded as unique. As a result of their understanding of incarnation, the church's doctrine of the Trinity is rejected, as there are not three divine 'persons', but only three different divine 'manifestations' (Obst 2020, p. 505). The rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity is also found among the Jehovah's Witnesses, who were already very active in Saxony at the beginning of the twentieth century (Schuster 2010). However, the significance of Jesus differs greatly between the Jehovah's Witnesses and Hirt und Herde, and there is no indication that Hain was in contact with representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses. Accordingly, this is likely to be a mere coincidence.

The community's theology, which was originally strongly cosmological in nature, differs in most respects from the classical beliefs of Protestant or Catholic origin. For example, the community does not recognize original sin, as it assumes that individuals have complete freedom of will. Individuals therefore always make their own conscious decisions between good and evil. The basic idea of this theology is that God created a good world. After Lucifer fell from grace, God created the earth and a dark realm beneath it, where Lucifer's ideas rule. God ultimately created the dark realm and the earth to give all individuals who had fallen from grace the chance to find their way back to him. In this interpretation, human beings themselves are therefore always an indissoluble connection between the divine spirit, the soul, which originates from Lucifer's dark realm, and the body as a material shell that surrounds the spirit and soul.

The eternal goal of the doctrine of Hirt und Herde is the conversion of the individual human being to the good that he already carries within himself through the divine spirit. Even if one might suspect similarities to concepts of Christian Gnosticism from antiquity at this point (see Aland 2014), it is more than unlikely that Hain had any knowledge of these.

By turning to God and rejecting evil, people are shown the way to experience divine salvation. In order to give people in different times examples of such conversion, God has repeatedly revealed himself to humanity. The incarnation of God in Jesus is considered the most outstanding event in this regard, but it does not represent the final revelation of God. The life of Jesus is regarded by the members of Hirt und Herde as a model of pure obedience to the law, whereby his death on the cross is interpreted not as a sacrificial death, but as an example of God's forgiveness towards mankind. Although the incarnation of God in Jesus was a unique event, the direct work of God is evident in people such as August Hermann Hain, which is why he, too, serves as an example for humanity on the path to salvation through his actions and his faith.

Ultimately, the entire theological teaching of the Christian community Hirt und Herde aims at the transformation of the individual toward goodness. Through the 'dualism' of spirit and soul, humans can always choose divine goodness (which they carry within themselves through the Spirit of God) through their personal behavior and can resist worldly and spiritual temptations. The divine spirit and one's own reason enable people to attain perfection in the form of salvation through their actions, deeds, and faith. In order to give people role models on this path, God revealed himself in Jesus and also worked for the last time in the person of August Hermann Hain, according to the beliefs.

5. Mission and Dissemination Until 1933

During August Hermann Hain's lifetime, the community mainly found new members through the direct influence of the 'dear father' (*lieber Vater*), as Hain is referred to internally. Even though there are virtually no historical sources on developments in the years up to

1910, it can be assumed that Hain and his followers invited people to small gatherings in the western Saxon Erzgebirge region and in eastern Thuringia to present their new beliefs. During the German Empire, the radius of dissemination expanded across western Saxony to the Leipzig area in northern Saxony. In addition, there were communities in northern Bavaria around the city of Hof and in the Czechoslovak Republic on the border with Saxony after the First World War at the latest, although the exact years of their establishment are unknown.

In the early years, the group was able to gain new followers almost undisturbed, as there were no conflicts with state authorities and church representatives only became aware of Hirt und Herde in 1910. At that time, the number of members was probably between 500 and 600, mainly from the working class and craftsmen milieu (Obst 2020, p. 494). Kurt Hutten also cites a figure of around 600 members by 1913 (Hutten 1961, p. 429). However, the geographical spread shortly before the start of the First World War must be interpreted more broadly than Hutten does. He sees only a regional distribution around the Saxon town of Meerane in the Erzgebirge until the outbreak of war. However, members of Hirt und Herde can already be traced back to Leipzig in 1913 (Jentsch 1956, p. 26). This shows that within twenty years, the community had already spread beyond its original sphere of influence in the Erzgebirge region.

As a result of its growth and confrontational attitude towards the established churches, local pastors began to take active measures against Hirt und Herde gatherings. On the one hand, church representatives tried to loudly disrupt meetings of Hain and his followers, and on the other hand, they reported Hain to the state authorities for his massive criticism of the church, which led to a two-week prison sentence for Hain in 1913 (Obst 2020, p. 495).

Due to the fact that in its early days the community was socially structured primarily of craftsmen and workers, and that its theological teachings demanded individual rational thinking based on biblical values, it adopted a pacifist stance and a socio-politically critical attitude based on the so-called ‘social question’ (see Wehler 1995, pp. 700–847). During this period, Protestant pastors informed government authorities about the content of Hain’s speeches, probably also because they saw Hain as increasing competition. Since Hain openly agitated against the war and state representatives at these events, the responsible military authorities issued a ban on the entire community for the Kingdom of Saxony in May 1916 and a similar ban in March 1917 for the Saxony-Altenburg region in the east of today’s federal state of Thuringia. However, these bans did not apply to the neighboring Grand Duchy of Saxony-Weimar—also in today’s Thuringia—where Hain’s followers were able to continue proselytizing unhindered until the end of the war. In the two areas where Hirt und Herde was banned, the members nevertheless continued to promote their faith. They found new followers, especially among women whose husbands had been drafted into the war as soldiers. Helmut Obst summarizes the development of membership until 1918 as follows: “However, the old experience that prohibitions and repressive measures ultimately do not weaken but strengthen vibrant religious communities was also confirmed in this case. The Herde gained numerous new followers during the period of prohibition” (Obst 2020, pp. 495–96).

The critical attitude of parts of the working class and rural population towards Germany’s entry into the war in 1914 (Gause 1997) and the open enthusiasm for and support of the war by a large proportion of Protestant representatives in Germany (Vollnhals 2009) allowed Hain’s community to continue to grow despite the ban. Unlike most church representatives, who legitimized Germany’s war until the very end (also religiously) (see Greschat 2014), Hain did not participate in such justifications. Against the backdrop of ever-increasing war-related hardships and the steadily growing number of wounded and dead soldiers, a Christian pacifist religious system such as Hain’s represented an alternative

for the people. In addition, Hain and his followers operated in an area where they were deeply rooted. They knew the customs, ideas, and idiosyncrasies of the inhabitants, which further increased the community's acceptance.

After the end of the war in 1918, the economic and personal situation for many Germans deteriorated further in the years that followed. In addition to mass unemployment, the restrictive peace terms of the Treaty of Versailles, the hyperinflation of 1923, and the occupation of the Ruhr region by French and Belgian troops, general political instability made the early years of the first German republic appear to be a time of turmoil and chaos (see [Ullrich 2023](#); [Wehler 2003](#), pp. 239–52, 397–414). This also included repeated uprisings and coup attempts by right-wing and left-wing extremists. In March 1921, for example, the Central German Uprising (*Mitteldeutscher Aufstand*) took place in the industrial region of Halle-Leuna north of Leipzig, resulting in around 180 deaths—in the immediate area where Hirt und Herde were active ([Knatz 2000](#)).

In this socio-political climate of general uncertainty, political and economic turmoil, uprisings, etc., Hain managed to win more and more followers for his community. During this period, new members were mostly recruited through meetings in public spaces and restaurants, which were announced in advance in newspaper advertisements. For example, on 14 August 1920, the newspaper *Leipziger Tageszeitung* announced a lecture entitled 'On the True and Just Word of God' (*Über das wahre und gerechte Wort Gottes*) for the following day ([Anon 1920](#)). After the First World War—unfortunately, there are no relevant sources for the first decade of the twentieth century—there was a corresponding change in the way new followers were recruited: The dissemination of their own teachings now took place with the help of announced lectures, which in turn were held in public spaces and were not closed events. This new form of member recruitment, which was new to Hirt und Herde as far as we know, made it possible to reach far more people in a much larger area than was possible through member recruitment via personal contacts alone.

The new legal possibilities in the new democratic state system of the Weimar Republic also favored such a development. There were hardly any noticeable restrictions on religious communities on the part of the state, as long as they operated within the constitutional order ([Rehtmeyer 2024](#), pp. 293–300). Religious communities could now easily promote their teachings publicly and publish announcements in the press. In addition, the Weimar Constitution gave the state far fewer opportunities to take action against religious communities. This was much easier in the German Empire, as illustrated by the ban on Hirt und Herde in the regions of Saxony and Saxony-Altenburg. It should therefore also be noted that the changes in the political—and thus legal—framework in 1918/19 had an influence on the development of Hirt und Herde.

Around 1925, 'the flock' (die Herde), as the community liked to call itself, reached its first peak with approximately 4000 members ([Hutten 1961](#), p. 430). In Saxony, where around 3000 people professed their belief in Hain's teachings at that time, Hirt und Herde had grown to become the third-largest religious community ([Obst 2020](#), p. 498). Between 1924 and 1929, Hirt und Herde even succeeded in electing a representative in the local elections in Plauen in the Vogtland region in western Saxony. This note can be found in the first edition of Helmut Obst's book from 1980 ([Obst 1980](#), p. 290).

6. The Nazi Era

The death of August Hermann Hain on 29 July 1927 marked the first profound turning point for the Christian community Hirt und Herde. Hain's son from his second marriage, Karl Hermann Hain, took over the leadership of the community, but he—like all subsequent leaders—did not have the same position in the theological doctrine of this religious community as August Hermann Hain had had. With the death of Hain, not only

did the founder of the religion die, but the community also lost its charismatic leader. Even though it is difficult to identify the causal factors almost 100 years after Hain's death, it can nevertheless be said that the death of August Hermann Hain had a direct impact on the further development of the community. Membership numbers stagnated for the first time, and the community's public presence slowly declined.

At the end of 1929, the global economic crisis originating in the USA hit Germany, and unemployment figures rose rapidly within a short period of time. In the elections, anti-democratic, radical and totalitarian parties such as Adolf Hitler's National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) or the Communist Party of Germany (KPD)—which acted on instructions from Moscow—recorded high gains in votes. General political tensions increased, particularly in the form of violent street battles throughout Germany. Such a period of uncertainty should actually have led to stronger membership growth in communities such as Hirt und Herde, similar to what happened during and shortly after the First World War. However, Hain's death and the accompanying slow withdrawal from public life prevented further membership growth for the time being, according to my thesis.

On 30 January 1933, Adolf Hitler was appointed German Reich Chancellor, and within a few months, the NSDAP established a totalitarian dictatorship, which also meant the end of the Weimar Republic, based on the principles of the rule of law (Becker 1992). Just a few months after Hitler came to power, the Christian community Hirt und Herde was banned. Even before 1933, the community had repeatedly been accused of pursuing communist ideas (Schuster 2012). Paul Scheurlen, who at that time had written a book about new religious communities that was always highly polemical and repeatedly republished, even accused Hirt und Herde of having a direct theological connection with the Jehovah's Witnesses and also criticized Hirt und Herde for being very pacifist and speaking out against any kind of war (Scheurlen 1930, pp. 193–95). Since Jehovah's Witnesses, along with Jews, communists, and Freemasons, were among the enemy stereotypes propagated during the Third Reich, false accusations such as those made by Scheurlen could be very dangerous for religious groups. But at the end the members of the Christian community Hirt und Herde were able to survive the Nazi era relatively unscathed. This means that they were not persecuted or imprisoned simply because they were members of the community until it was banned. This is primarily due to the fact that the local police and surveillance authorities did not persecute former members of the community to the same extent as, for example, Jews, communists, or even Jehovah's Witnesses. Although there were isolated cases of house searches. And there is evidence of fines imposed by the courts because members met on a larger scale despite the ban. The police did not consider members of Hirt und Herde to be outright enemies of the state (Schuster 2012, pp. 152–55). As long as the members of the community did not act as Hirt und Herde supporters in public, but held religious meetings in private, the surveillance authorities even tolerated them to continue, which means the police did nothing against such private meetings. Ultimately, the National Socialists were not interested in destroying the religious community, as was the case with the Jehovah's Witnesses (Hacke 2011) or Freemasonry (Neuberger 2001), for example. Their sole aim was to prevent Hirt und Herde from appearing in public and recruiting new members.

Nevertheless, the community was officially banned, and there was always the danger that the indirect tolerance of private gatherings could be replaced by more repressive measures. Such a permanent threat during the Third Reich probably further strengthened the already strong sense of community within Hirt und Herde. In such an exceptional situation, my thesis is that the opposite of what Peter L. Berger described for religion in pluralistic societies occurred. Communication with the social 'outside world' about one's own religious worldview could no longer take place due to the ban on the community that

existed until 1945. Instead, the members had to retreat into an internal emigration within the community in terms of their religion. The absence of the founder of the religion, who had drawn attention to himself and his Herde until his death in 1927, further reinforced the community's withdrawal from the public eye, so that religious communication was concentrated almost exclusively within the community.

Berger notes that pluralism multiplies plausible explanatory models and their structures in a person's social environment (Berger 2015, p. 54). This means that the diversity of opinions and explanations in an individual's environment within a pluralistic society creates new and diverse explanatory possibilities for the individual. In the Third Reich, there was pluralism on a social and cultural level, but not on a societal level, which was shaped by the ideologically prescribed idea of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community) (see von Reeken and Thießen 2013; Steuwer 2013; Steber and Gotto 2014). Due to the ban on the community, this meant that communication about religion by members of Hirt und Herde outside their own community was no longer possible. By communication, I also mean the sometimes polemical disputes between Hirt und Herde and the Protestant regional churches, which, until the death of August Hermann Hain, helped shape the public perception and actions of the religious community in public. From 1933 onwards, this was no longer possible. Members of Hirt und Herde were, so to speak, excluded from the rest of society at the social level with regard to communication about religion. This marked the beginning of their gradual withdrawal from social discourse. This is not to say that there was no longer any 'external communication' and that complete social isolation ensued. The members of Hirt und Herde continued to pursue their professional and social obligations. I am referring to the absence of communication in terms of interreligious communication and communication between members of Hirt und Herde and non-members on religious topics.

7. The Period of Socialist Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic

Although the political conditions for Hirt und Herde changed fundamentally with the unconditional surrender of the Third Reich in May 1945, the members of the religious community of Hirt und Herde remained in internal emigration during the socialist dictatorship of the GDR. With the end of Nazi rule, the ban that had been in place since 1933 also came to an end. In addition to resuming Bible study sessions, Hirt und Herde organized a festival in Leipzig in 1948 to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the birth of August Hermann Hain, which was attended by an estimated 4000 members (Reller 1978, p. 346). The consistency in membership numbers compared to 1925 can be explained by the fact that the period of prohibition during the Third Reich led to a strengthening of the sense of community within the country. Since the National Socialists did not generally take action against private gatherings, the cohesive force of the community remained intact, and it was probably also possible to recruit new members in the immediate personal environment. In addition, at the end of the Second World War and immediately afterwards, more people are likely to have joined the community. It is conceivable that women in particular, whose husbands had been killed in the war or were still prisoners of war, sought support in the community, as was the case at the end of the First World War.

In 1951, the community was granted state recognition as a religious community by the Ministry of the Interior of the GDR. Even though Hirt und Herde was no longer subject to repression, the secret police of the Ministry for State Security (*Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*) kept an eye on the community by recruiting so-called unofficial collaborators (*Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*) among its members, who reported to the secret police on developments, foreign contacts, and membership structures.² According to Reller, the membership of Hirt und Herde remained between 5000 and 6000 people until the 1960s (Reller 1978, p. 346). Based

on documents from the Ministry for State Security, which cite the exact number of 1925 members for the Gera district in 1956, it is also possible to estimate the total number of members at between 5000 and 6000.

Up until that point, in addition to the districts established as administrative units in the traditional areas of Saxony and Thuringia, Hirt und Herde also had one district each in Rehau in Upper Franconia/northern Bavaria (western Germany) and Aš (now Czechia). Communities in a specific geographical area are grouped together into districts. The original division of the distribution area into twelve districts is based on the biblical tradition of the apostles. The district of Aš no longer exists today, which means that there are now no or only a few members of the community in Czechia. Accordingly, Hirt und Herde is now only active in Germany in terms of organization.

In 1977, the Protestant Central Office for Worldview Issues (*Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen*) reported on a meeting of around 80 members of the community in Böblingen near Stuttgart in western Germany. At that time, there were around 300 members scattered throughout West Germany, with most members living in the Rehau area. The small town of Rehau, located in the German state of Bavaria, lies directly on the border with Czechia and the state of Saxony, which until 1990 formed the border between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic.

The unnamed author of this report gives a membership figure of around 6000 in the GDR for 1977 (Anon 1977, p. 193). However, it is not clear where he got this information. For the early 1990s, Hubert Kirchner, in his report on free churches and religious communities in the former GDR, which was produced as part of the Expert Commission for the German parliament, gave a figure of 3000 to 4000 members (Kirchner 1995, p. 955). However, Kirchner does not indicate how he arrived at these figures, so this information should be regarded as an estimate. It is particularly interesting to note that Hubert Kirchner published a handbook on free churches and denominational minority churches in the GDR as early as 1987, in which the Christian community Hirt und Herde does not appear (Kirchner 1987). The fifth edition of Horst Reller's handbook on religious communities in Germany, published in 2000, lists 3000 members for 1992 and only 2000 for 1997 (Reller et al. 2000, p. 283).

8. Summary Taking into Account the Current Situation in a Pluralistic Society

The sharp decline in religious affiliation among the population of the former GDR (Müller 2014) is also evident in the numbers reported by Hirt und Herde. The estimated 5000 to 6000 members in the immediate postwar period had dwindled to only about 700 by 2016.³ It would, however, be incomplete to attempt to explain this development as an inevitable secularization in modern societies.

Steve Bruce, one of the leading proponents of secularization theory, defines secularization as the loss of social significance of religion at both the individual and institutional levels. While this loss of significance does not arise automatically in the course of social modernization processes, it is nonetheless associated with such processes in various forms (Bruce 2005, p. 37). The theory of the secularization of modern societies—if not as a direct consequence, then at least indirectly as a result of social change processes—has increasingly faced criticism in recent decades. As already mentioned, Peter L. Berger also abandoned his initially positive view of secularization theory. Shortly before his death, he instead presented his ideas regarding the concept of 'pluralization' to explain developments in religion within modern societies. To explain his ideas, he first defines religion as simply and clearly as possible. Religion is understood as a belief that "there is a reality beyond the reality of everyday experience and that this reality is of great significance for human life" (Berger 2015, p. 35). The only additional distinction he makes in this context is the

differentiation between “religion in the consciousness and behavior of individuals and religion in collective institutions” (ibid., p. 36), which he addresses separately.

Starting from such a working definition, Berger turns to his interpretation of pluralization. While pluralism is to be understood as a (partly ideologically) established concept, and plurality, on the other hand, denotes a coexistence of religious traditions and beliefs, pluralization instead describes a historical process (Lehmann and Koch 2020, p. 5), which is why the term pluralization is used hereafter. Regarding pluralization, Berger emphasizes that it should be understood not merely as a social phenomenon, but as an experience-based mode of thinking. As a result of observations, exchanges, etc.—collectively referred to here as ‘experience’—the individual comes to realize that there is no ultimate truth. In relation to religion, this means, according to Berger, that the individual “can no longer take for granted the worldview into which he or she happened to be born” (Berger 2015, p. 50). Such a process, however, can only take place in an environment “where people of different ethnicities, worldviews, and moral convictions live together peacefully and treat one another with kindness” (ibid., p. 16). In such an environment, people of the most diverse backgrounds will talk to one another and inevitably influence one another in the process. Such influence, in turn, can take place at a wide variety of levels, for example in the form of social and historical changes or, more traditionally, through personal conversations. As a direct consequence of the pluralization of modern societies, previously taken-for-granted assumptions are being abandoned (or at least increasingly questioned), in which Berger perceives a tendency for religion to shift from the realm of certainty to that of mere opinion (ibid., p. 51).

This does not mean, however, that secularization trends can be completely disregarded. In recent years, an increasing number of experts have advocated the approach of understanding secularization, privatization, and differentiation as part of pluralization. Religious affiliation is becoming increasingly differentiated, as are the forms of individual religiosity and non-religiosity (Pickel 2017, p. 67). The region of the former GDR, the main area of influence of the Christliche Gemeinschaft Hirt und Herde, is particularly marked by a comprehensive secularization of society. In 2022, only twenty-four percent of the total population in this region belonged to a Protestant regional church or the Catholic Church—in contrast to sixty-five percent of the population in the western part of Germany (von Elm et al. 2025, p. 718). However, a distinction must be made here: The Erzgebirge, where Hirt und Herde was founded and where the community’s main area of influence remains to this day, has a higher proportion of church members—thirty-two percent of the total population—compared to the average for the population of eastern Germany (ibid., p. 719).

The Erzgebirge—in addition to their sometimes difficult-to-access and simultaneously peripheral location—have been shaped by mining for centuries. This combination led to a stronger and more deeply rooted religiosity among the local population, which is why secularization has not yet progressed as far here as in other areas of eastern Germany. The continued strong emphasis on family and traditional socialization in the Erzgebirge also hindered the state-driven disengagement of people from the church between 1949 and 1989 more effectively than in other Protestant-dominated regions of the GDR (Wappler 2010). This is merely intended to illustrate that historical, political, and social conditions—even at the micro level—can have a strong influence on the secularization of a society.

This must also be taken into account in the analysis with regard to Hirt und Herde and its development after 1945. On the one hand, Hirt und Herde did not resume active missionary work after the Second World War and withdrew permanently from the public eye, with the result that to this day the community gains new members almost exclusively through natural reproduction. On the other hand, specific social and political changes took

effect in the GDR and the immediate post-reunification period of the 1990s, leading to a massive decline in the membership of religious communities. Repressive measures by the socialist state alone do not provide a sufficient explanation for this development—namely, that while over ninety percent of the population belonged to a religious denomination in 1949, today only slightly more than twenty percent of the East German population is affiliated with a denomination. With the economic transformation processes of industry, crafts, and agriculture—enforced by the GDR regime—toward state-administered units, which entailed the disempowerment of the property-owning and educated middle class, including the crafts sector, a milieu vital to the internal dynamics of religious communities collapsed (Pollack and Rosta 2015, pp. 274–88). Furthermore, the population of the GDR declined from 18.94 million (1949) to 16.43 million (1989) due to a declining birth rate and a wave of emigration that persisted until the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 (Stastista 2026). Such a population decline of around fifteen percent must be factored in alongside the aforementioned socioeconomic upheavals in order to understand the massive decline in membership at Hirt und Herde.⁴

While in other countries of the former Eastern Bloc—despite repression that was in some cases more severe than in the GDR—religions were able to survive the socialist era virtually unscathed in terms of numbers, the specific circumstances in East Germany led to a sustained decline in religious affiliation. After 1990, there was also a massive labor migration, primarily of younger people, from the former GDR to the western parts of Germany. Combined with the persistently low birth rate, the population in the territory of the former GDR—now excluding East Berlin—fell further to 12.4 million people (Statistisches Bundesamt 2025).

For small religious communities such as Hirt und Herde, which moreover had no significant religious infrastructure outside their geographically limited area of influence, the exodus following the upheaval of 1990 meant a further loss of members, as former members of the religious community could not be integrated into any existing internal religious network in their new home. The only exception was the district around the town of Rehau in northern Bavaria. This was the only remaining area in West Germany where a small number of Hirt und Herde members still resided. External factors such as political upheavals or massive population shifts always influence institutionalized religions, which in turn must respond to changes such as population decline, etc., in order to remain capable of acting and to continue fulfilling their own ‘religious mission’.

This secular environment also changes the general perception of religion: Against the backdrop of diverse social and technological changes, individuals have access to various worldviews and life paths from which they can freely choose in a pluralistic society. As a rule, individuals no longer need to justify turning away from religion. In more secularized areas, one’s own religiosity must even be justified to some extent to the non-religious environment (Dreier and Hennig 2025, p. 681). This means that, in general, the pressure on the individual to justify themselves to themselves and their religious community decreases when they wish to leave the community.

In the case of Hirt und Herde, closing oneself off from such influences—for example, through social isolation—is not possible: In Germany, there is compulsory education, so that young members of Hirt und Herde are automatically socialized into a secularized world. For Peter L. Berger, such a situation means that people develop the ability to deal with both religious and secular interpretations of reality (Berger 2015, p. 87).

The pluralistic society that has emerged in the modern era—whose processes of change have received a renewed boost over the past thirty-five years as a result of comprehensive mobility, ubiquitous access to information, supraregional networking through new communication technologies, and (almost) unrestricted travel opportunities—has also had an

impact on the theological framework of Hirt und Herde. The theology of the community attributes to the human body merely the function of a material shell for the spirit and soul. Accordingly, for a long time there were no funeral rites or mourning ceremonies at Hirt und Herde, since physical death was interpreted as the soul's transition into the peaceful kingdom of God, which, from a theological perspective, consequently offered no cause for mourning (Hutten 1961, p. 436). The polemic derived from this in the early, often polemical 'sect books'—thrown deceased relatives out of the house and only allowed themselves to be persuaded by police intervention to make the necessary preparations for the funeral" (Scheurlen 1930, p. 196) is, of course, not accurate in such a form. Funerals, however, take place without a procession or (mourning) ceremony, and visiting the grave site is still not customary today. Although the dead body is still there, it signifies the member's complete absence from the earth. As a mere shell, however, the body no longer requires any special treatment, which is why, although the body is buried, no significance is attributed to this act. The burial practice at Hirt und Herde is accordingly based on the interpretation of the body as a mere material shell (see Höpflinger and Müller 2022, p. 73). However, this burial practice, which is still carried out today, has recently been subject to a differentiation: Hirt und Herde now allows members, at their express request, to have the burial of relatives accompanied by a customary funeral ritual.⁵

While members of Hirt und Herde resolutely distanced themselves from the church and its rites in the first decades of the group's existence, the ban imposed in 1933 led to a forced withdrawal from public life, followed by a voluntary withdrawal beginning in 1945 as a result of a conscious decision, which limited contacts (and thus communication) outside the community to a minimum. The societal, social, and political changes after 1990 and the now ubiquitous access to information are also affecting religion against the backdrop of societal pluralization. Individual needs, such as the opportunity to mourn in the form of a funeral ritual, are brought about by the breakdown of worldviews previously taken for granted. Such a breakdown, in turn, has its cause—generally speaking—in communication. The individual comes to know his or her immediate surroundings as reality (Berger and Luckmann 1963, pp. 421–22). The disruption of such a reality—which previously existed within a relatively closed space of the community and the GDR, with its severely limited opportunities for travel, information, and communication—as a result of communication across the actual boundaries of the community gives rise to new, broader realities for its members. Religious communities then have the option of rejecting such new realities in their doctrine and practice (to the point of fundamentalist tendencies) or of adapting to them (within the limits of their own doctrinal framework).

Despite a sharp decline in the number of followers and an aging membership base, the leadership of Hirt und Herde has decided to remain passive with regard to its public relations efforts. Missionary activities continue to be suspended, a decision justified by God's plan for the religious community. According to their interpretation, if God were to desire a change in the community's public presence, He would communicate this to the community accordingly.⁶ Accordingly, Hirt und Herde has no internet presence, although such a presence is not entirely ruled out for the future. This makes it clear that the community is gradually beginning to adapt to the new conditions of a pluralistic society—or at least does not rule out such a gradual adaptation. Although active recruitment of members still does not take place, an opening toward public visibility in the form of a future internet presence is at least not entirely ruled out. It would be interesting to see, should such a future website be launched, whether the theological doctrine—which has been transmitted exclusively orally up to the present—would then be presented in written form for the first time.

Similarly, inquiries from the academic community are now being answered, though the community generally avoids causing a stir in media and academic discourse, a stance attributable in part to negative past experiences regarding public-populist debates on so-called ‘psycho-sects’. Furthermore, in recent years, discussions have taken place between the leadership of Hirt und Herde and official representatives of the Saxon Regional Church, intended to facilitate mutual understanding. Since August Hermann Hain and his followers left the church in the early 1920s, there has been virtually no official contact between the two religions in the decades that followed.

In the decades following the Second World War—and, in the area of the former GDR that is the focus here, particularly rapidly since 1990—a pluralistic society has developed whose (constantly changing) realities are based on communication. Such a change, which has received a renewed boost in recent decades due to the ubiquity of the internet, consequently also affects small religious communities such as Hirt und Herde, a trend that has been massively intensified by the widespread adoption of the internet. The realities with which the individual grows up are constantly being altered or called into question as a result of communication. Accordingly, the realities regarding one’s own belief system—into which the individual was previously born—are also changing.

In the early decades of Hirt und Herde, the community’s confrontational stance toward the established churches defined such a reality. The ‘truth’ that defined this reality emanated from August Hermann Hain. As a result of Hirt und Herde’s separation from other religions and the resulting lack of communication on an equal footing, this reality shaped the lives of the community’s members. The death of August Hermann Hain in 1927 and the group’s subsequent withdrawal from the public eye, as well as the ban during the Nazi era, preserved that reality, since communication was only possible to a limited extent after 1933. Although recognition as a religious community in the GDR officially permitted such communication, it did not take place to any significant extent with other religions. For a long time, there was no contact with the Protestant regional churches due to the negative experiences from the community’s early days. And international contacts were no longer easily possible after 1949 due to the GDR’s self-imposed isolation. With the closure of the inner-German border in 1952—only the border in Berlin remained open until 1961—direct contact with the members of Hirt und Herde in Northern Bavaria and other regions in West Germany was also forcibly severed. The already limited access to information in the GDR fostered the preservation of its own reality. Admittedly, the anti-church measures of the governments, the nationalization of the economy, and the general decline in the birth rate in the GDR left their mark. However, the lack of communication due to the virtually non-existent pluralistic society in the GDR ensured that the small religious community was able to survive the forty years of dictatorship relatively unscathed in terms of its membership. The decline in membership between 1949 and 1989 in Hirt und Herde can be explained by the general population decline in the GDR due to emigration (until 1961) and the noticeable drop in the birth rate.

The massive upheavals at all levels of East German society in connection with the collapse of the GDR dictatorship, however, fundamentally changed the situation. On the one hand, political and economic factors triggered a massive wave of emigration from the territory of the former GDR. On the other hand, the GDR’s isolation from the Western world—which, of course, had never fully succeeded—suddenly collapsed, and everything changed fundamentally, from basic economic principles to the various possibilities for individual lifestyles. Overnight, the territory of the former GDR was confronted with a society that was becoming even more pluralistic in every respect. The information revolution that began a few years later with the advent of the internet in people’s daily lives accelerated this social pluralization exponentially.

While the first dictatorship in Germany strengthened the community's internal cohesion through prohibition, the conditions in the GDR and the unique religious milieu of the Erzgebirge preserved the Christliche Gemeinschaft Hirt und Herde in terms of its substantive development as well as its membership numbers, when one takes into account the general population decline during the forty years of GDR dictatorship. The rapid transformation after 1990 toward a pluralistic society, however, has left a significant mark on Hirt und Herde. The interplay of various factors—such as the exodus of many people, the economic challenges after 1990, the rapid transition from a dictatorship isolated from Western Europe to a liberal, self-determined way of life, and much more—combined with the already strong forces of secularization within East German society to cause a visible decline in membership at Hirt und Herde.

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Notes

- ¹ Information provided by Matthias Hain to the author. All subsequent information, unless otherwise stated, is based on Schuster (2016). This handbook article is based on two oral interviews conducted by the author with the current director of Hirt und Herde, Matthias Hain, in 2015. Hain did not want the interview to be video or audio recorded but was available to discuss the content of the article. Hirt und Herde did not request authorization for the article.
- ² Federal Archive Berlin [BArch], MfS—HA XX/4, 562, pp. 39–73; BArch, MfS—HA XX/4, 846, p. 2; BArch, MfS—HA XX/4, 1910, p. 16. The Ministry for State Security continued its surveillance until the end of the GDR in 1989.
- ³ Figures provided by Matthias Hain to the author. Hain, Matthias (director of Christliche Gemeinschaft Hirt und Herde). 2015. In discussion with the author.
- ⁴ Since the author has no evidence that the average birth rate among Herde members differs significantly from that of the rest of the population of the former GDR, it is assumed that the birth rate among members of the community has also declined over the decades.
- ⁵ Information provided by Matthias Hain to the author. Hain, Matthias (director of Christliche Gemeinschaft Hirt und Herde). 2015. In discussion with the author.
- ⁶ See Note 5 above.

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