Introduction: Conservative, Right-Wing Populist or Far-Right Extremist?

Conceptual Clarifications

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A liberal-democratic, pluralistic society depends on allowing space for a wide variety of beliefs and opinions: progressive as well as conservative, left-wing as well as neoliberal, secularist as well as religious. There is even room for vulgarity and provocation, although this does not mean that one is not allowed to speak out against these beliefs and opinions. While it can even be a moral imperative to express one's dissent openly, a limit is reached as soon as liberal-democratic societies and their constituting foundations (such as respect for human dignity, pluralism and the rule of law) are deliberately attacked and undermined. The rationale for this is concisely summarised in Karl Popper's paradox of tolerance: "Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them."[1]

Determining the boundary of what constitutes a serious threat to the very foundations of liberal democracy[2] is crucial. On the one hand, the threshold for what constitutes such a threat can be set too low. In this case, there is the danger – to the detriment of liberal democracy – of legitimate ideas that are disagreeable from the perspective of one's own political convictions being suppressed with reference to the fight against supposed extremism, and of constructive dialogue and exchange, which characterise and invigorate a pluralistic society, being prevented. On the other hand, the threshold for what consti-

1 Popper, Karl: The Open Society and Its Enemies, Volume 1, London: George Routledge & Sons 1945, Reprint of 1947, p. 226 (note 4 in chapter 7).

2 The term "liberal democracy" is used in the sense of the German term "*freiheitliche demokratische Grundordnung*."

tutes such a threat can be set too high and threats to liberal democracy may be overlooked, underestimated and downplayed. It becomes evident that defining the limit is by no means a trivial matter. However, the following distinctions can be made:

On the right edge of the political spectrum, political forces that refuse non-necessary societal change[3] but clearly respect the fundamental principles of liberal democracy are nowadays usually referred to as "conservative." By contrast, forces to which the latter clearly no longer applies are referred to as "far-right extremist." The distance and opposition to liberal democracy and its core principles become visible – for example – in the fact that corresponding actors openly show their racist, *völkisch*-nationalist, supremacist and/or anti-Semitic beliefs, often deny or even glorify the crimes of Nazism, do not hide their intention to overthrow the democratic system and publicly endorse violence as a political means.

Between the ideal-typical poles of "conservative" and "far-right extremist," there are also actors who partly reveal thematic-ideological overlaps with far-right extremism (for example rejection of pluralism, also often group-focused enmity) but proceed more subtly in their communication and avoid particularly radical statements, at least in their public appearance. These actors can be referred to as "right-wing populists." Unlike ideal-typical far-right extremists, they (at least in the short term) do not strive to overthrow the democratic system or at least do not announce this publicly.[4]

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3 See the definition provided in the final report of the task group established pursuant to the decision of the 27th Evangelical Lutheran State Synod of Saxony, on page 14, paragraph 8, in March 2021: https://engagiert.evlks.de/fileadmin/userfiles/EVLKS_engagiert/B._Landeskirche/Landessynode/Digitalsynode_Maerz_2021/Schlussbericht-AG-Spurgruppe.pdf, accessed on: 6 Sep. 2023.

4 In academia and practice, different characteristics are used to define "far-right extremism," sometimes in distinction to "right-wing populism." This is also due to the fact that far-right extremism and populism occur in different forms. The definitions introduced in the last two paragraphs summarise core elements that are used by various relevant experts for classification, see e.g. Priester, Karin: "Fließende Grenzen zwischen Rechtsextremismus und Rechtspopulismus in Europa?" (28 Oct. 2010), https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/32423/fliessende-grenzen-zwischen-rechtsextremismus-und-rechtspopulismus-in-europa/, accessed on: 17 Jan. 2024; Amadeu Antonio Stiftung: Was ist Rechtsextremismus und Rechtspopulismus?, https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/rechtsextremismus-rechtspopulismus/was-ist-rechtsextremismus/, accessed on 17. Jan. 2024.

The transitions between categories are often seamless and sometimes difficult to detect: the boundary between right-wing populism and right-wing extremism is blurred not only because overlaps often exist both at thematic-ideological level and also at the level of relationships and structures. In this sense, right-wing populism must not be underestimated in terms of its potential for radicalisation towards extremism and its potential for the subtly subversive. It is not uncommon for actors with far-right extremist goals to resort to more moderate right-wing populist rhetoric in order to reach a broader public and facilitate and promote a normalisation of their right-wing ideas.[5]

It is also difficult to distinguish between the fringes of conservatism and right-wing populism, especially since there are different understandings of the two terms, which are often not clearly contoured. Right-wing forces deliberately exploit this blurriness by presenting themselves as supposedly "true conservatives," often linked to the accusation that centre-right parties are not (or no longer) conservative enough. Such a moderate external image is supposed to help them to appeal to broader voter groups and make their policies and thought patterns socially acceptable and normalise them in this sense. In fact, there is a danger that right-wing narratives and thought patterns partly based on widespread resentments will spread far into the centre of society and that even "traditional" and "bourgeois" circles – which see themselves as "classically conservative" – will internalise rhetorical patterns and ideas that originate from right-wing circles and transgress the boundaries of what is compatible with liberal democracy.[6]

5 Normalisation as a misguided societal reaction to the far right and normalisation as a strategy of far-right actors to appeal to broader audiences has been documented and examined in numerous academic studies and journalistic articles (see e.g. de Jonge, Léonie/Gaufman, Elizaveta: "The normalisation of the far right in the Dutch media in the run-up to the 2021 general elections," in: Discourse & Society, 33(6/2022), pp. 773–787.

6 A good example for this is the "Christian right" in Germany, as analysed well by Liane Bednarz: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung: Die Angstprediger – Wie rechte Christen Gesellschaft und Kirchen unterwandern (21 Jun. 2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVmfXRha5AU&t=3580s, accessed on: 6 Sep. 2023.

Right-wing populist rhetoric: Characteristics and typical patterns of argumentation

Populist rhetoric is so promising for far-right actors because this communication strategy allows them to feign normalisation and still present themselves as a new alternative – as being self-confident and power-conscious. The capacity to maintain this ambivalence is strategically crucial for them to gain new supporters or voters and assert their own interests. It enables populist actors to use the energy and emotions associated with protest movements for their own image. At the same time, this leads the broader public to underestimate the far right in terms of its radical and extremist potential.

In order to maintain such a tension (which is profitable for the far right), these actors resort to various rhetorical and psychological tricks. Typical patterns that have proven successful for the far right to have an impact far into society include the following:[7]

- It is characteristic for populism and its rhetoric that it claims to express the "true will of the people," even though a unified popular will is admittedly a dangerous fiction. Populists reject other views as inadmissible. Legitimate criticism of their own positions, statements and actions is often presented as discrimination or even oppression (for example in the form of alleged political correctness or "cancel culture"). In general, populists like to present themselves as the only resistance against a domestic political "establishment" or a "globalist elite" that is allegedly corrupt, incompetent and treacherous. In doing so, populists often blanketly deny integrity to political competitors and sow hatred and distrust of institutions that they do

7 Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.): Dem Populismus widerstehen. Arbeitshilfe zum kirchlichen Umgang mit rechtspopulistischen Tendenzen (= Arbeitshilfe Nr. 305), Bonn 2019; Hirschberger, Bernd/Voges, Katja: "Vereinnahmt und verzerrt. Wie der Rechtspopulismus die Religionsfreiheit instrumentalisiert," in: Forum Weltkirche (6/2021), pp. 19–22; Diakonie Deutschland. Evangelisches Werk für Diakonie und Entwicklung (ed.): Umgang mit Rechtsextremismus und Rechtspopulismus. Eine Handreichung für die Diakonie, 2. erw. Aufl., Berlin 2022; Spier, Tim: "Was versteht man unter 'Populismus'" (25 Sep. 2014), https://www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtspopulismus/192118/was-versteht-man-unter-populismus, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023; Priester, Karin: "Definitionen und Typologien des Populismus," in: Soziale Welt 62 (2/2011), pp. 185–198.

not themselves control. While the reference to "the people" serves the desire to belong to a community, the demarcation according to the scheme of "us against them" – which is often linked to a scapegoat logic – activates a mobilising resistance identity.

- In addition to accusations against domestic political opponents, multilateral institutions such as the EU, anonymous "globalist elites" or allegedly threatening minorities, simple answers to the complex challenges of the present are also at the centre of populist argumentation patterns. Of course, populist answers – which are often based on anti-liberal and discriminatory demands and baseless simplifications – cannot offer functional and sustainable solutions. Nevertheless, it has been shown that simplification, exaggeration and sometimes radicalisation have the potential to generate support from considerable parts of the population.
- This effect is often reinforced by a demagogic style of rhetoric that deliberately relies on dramatisation, enemy stereotypes, taboo-breaking, incitement and emotionalisation. Not infrequently, populists also invoke doomsday and conspiracy scenarios.
- Populists are often extremely flexible when it comes to issues that are not directly related to their drive to gain and maintain power or their radical convictions. They re-interpret, instrumentalise and distort these issues so that they serve their own agenda and suit their own interests.

Human rights populism: The populist appropriation of the human rights discourse

Human dignity and human rights are the backbone of liberal democracy. For the far right, human rights are inconvenient: on the one hand, because many of their political demands and ideological concepts are in contradiction to human rights guarantees and principles; on the other hand, because talk of human rights is widespread in societal debates and hardly anyone openly admits to being against human rights. Indeed, the term human rights is far too popular and connected with positive connotations, especially in Western countries.[8]

8 The rare exceptions include critical perspectives within the framework of postcolonial theories that highlight the ambivalences of the West in its pursuit of human rights, and inquiries into the effectiveness and enforceability of human rights against the backdrop of the still incredibly large number of human rights violations worldwide (See

Instead of openly questioning human rights, the strategy of relativising and re-interpreting them is therefore used much more often, both defensively to conceal one's own contradictions to and violations of human rights and offensively to use the semantics of human rights for one's own purposes. Such actors often use the powerful sound of human rights terms to promote their own popularity, hence profiting from the positive connotations associated with these terms. At the same time, they hollow out the content of the terms, distort and twist them to suit their own political goals and ideologies, use them as a source of (supposed) legitimacy and thus tear them out of the context of the human rights approach.[9] For example, the concept of "freedom" can be embedded well in the narrative of one's supposed struggle for freedom against the "mainstream," and the image of rights being taken away or withheld can also be easily harnessed into a narrative of resistance against the allegedly oppressive elite. Of course, in such reinterpretations and instrumentalisations, little remains of the substance of human rights. Often, their meaning is even turned into the opposite. Ultimately, a battle of interpretation fundamentally challenges the character of human rights as universal rights of freedom.[10]

Patterns of the right-wing populist appropriation and reinterpretation of religious freedom

One human right that is particularly often the target of populist appropriations and reinterpretations by the far right is religious freedom. In addition to

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e.g. Martinsen, Franziska: Grenzen der Menschenrechte. Staatsbürgerschaft, Zugehörigkeit, Partizipation, Bielefeld: transcript 2019, pp. 137–147; Maier, Hans: Menschenrechte. Eine Einführung in ihr Verständnis, Kevelaer: Topos plus 2015, p. 40–43).

9 Mégret, Frédéric: "Human Rights Populism," in: Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development 13 (2/2022), pp. 240–259.

10 In addition to freedom of religion or belief, other human rights are also subject to appropriation and reinterpretation by the far right. For instance, far-right actors often invoke freedom of speech when they are criticised with good reason. Although they are free to express their opinions and often have ample media exposure to do so, they claim to be disadvantaged or even oppressed. They frequently perceive themselves as victims of an alleged "political correctness." Similarly, freedom of the press is portrayed as under threat when the media (especially public broadcasters) do not provide favourable coverage of the far right and its agenda.

the appropriation of human rights semantics in general described above, it is attractive for right-wing populist actors to address the issue of religion.

Even if this stereotype does not do justice to the actual diversity of religiosity, the associative equation of "religion" and "conservative" is widespread, especially in countries with strong secularisation tendencies. In this respect, it can be promising for the far right to play on this theme when pursuing the goal of constructing a conservative image and staging oneself as a defender of tradition. Additionally, religion can also provide identity and community. These are fields that the far right also eagerly addresses, albeit only with pseudo-solutions that are highly problematic, since community and identity are usually understood in an exclusionary way as an ethno-nationalist, supremacist identity and an ethnically homogenous national community.[11]

Such motivations are matched by the rhetorical, strategic and argumentative patterns typically followed by populist attempts to appropriate and reinterpret religious freedom or more narrowly defined aspects of this human right, such as advocacy for persecuted and discriminated members of their respective own religious group. Usually, the far right resorts to the characteristics of populist rhetoric described in the previous sections and reinterprets terms such as "religious freedom" and "persecution of Christians" in such a way that they fit their own ideology and serve their own power-political goals and ambitions. The following patterns can be observed particularly frequently:

- Religious freedom is interpreted in a selective and clientelistic manner. It is demanded for one's own religious group, in Western countries usually for Christianity as the majority religion or – in some cases – also for a nationalistically charged secular belief. However, right-wing populist and extremist forces demand restrictions for other religious and ideological groups, in Western countries especially for Muslim minorities.
- Points of legitimate criticism – for example demands for stronger action against violence towards Christians in certain regions, for more effective protection of domestic security and against hate crime and organised crime, or the concern to limit the influence of authoritarian governments from abroad – are mixed with problematic and even inhumane narratives and resentments from the spectrum of far-right ideologies and conspiracy theories. Parts of these theories are for example implicitly or even explicitly

11 See also the German terms "*völkische Identität*" and "*Volksgemeinschaft*."

formulated theses on an alleged ethnic replacement[12] or the "Islamisation of Europe," an alleged threat to the "Christian-Jewish occident," criticism of a "gender and rainbow culture" or allegedly exaggerated "political correctness." Frequently, illegitimate and/or disproportionate measures are simultaneously demanded, for example discriminatory measures such as travel bans against certain religious groups.

- Right-wing populist and extremist forces present themselves as the only sincere defenders of religious freedom and persecuted members of their country's majority religion worldwide. At the same time, they blame their political opponents of inaction and accuse the opposing domestic political "establishment," multinational "elites" and "foreign," "alien" religious minorities of betraying or threatening the values of the national majority religion.
- Criticism of their own argumentation patterns is presented as illegitimate. In this context, right-wing populist and extremist forces often stage themselves as victims of a conspiracy of the mainstream, "cancel culture," or "political correctness."
- Religious freedom is misused as a pretext to justify populist and/or inhumane policies, for example excessive criticism of proportionate measures for pandemic control or demands for measures that discriminate against women or minorities.
- Religious freedom is taken out of the context of indivisible human rights and abstractly played off against other human rights.
- These populist reinterpretations distort the concept of freedom of religion or belief in a manner that fundamentally contradicts the logic of universal rights to freedom.[13]

12 In German, the NS-language term "*Umvolkung*" is often used by far-right actors.

13 See the overview of various patterns of populist appropriation and reinterpretation authored by Bernd Hirschberger in the chapter "Religious Freedom and Right-Wing Populism" of the Third Ecumenical Report on Religious Freedom: Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz/Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (eds.): 3. Ökumenischer Bericht zur Religionsfreiheit weltweit. Eine christliche Perspektive auf ein universelles Menschenrecht (= Gemeinsame Texte Nr. 28), Bonn/Hannover 2023.

A trend towards withdrawal and dangerous socio-political reactions towards populism

Attempts at appropriation and reinterpretation of the kind described in the previous section become particularly problematic when they coincide with a second trend, namely the fact that in societies which have become more secular, parts of the democratic spectrum – such as more left-wing or liberal-oriented secular forces – are increasingly withdrawing from open involvement in public activities promoting freedom of religion or belief. This is not only problematic because freedom of religion or belief – like other human rights – depends on a broad commitment of all democratic parts of society, but also because this withdrawal leaves room for the populist appropriation described earlier. The populist appropriation in turn risks turning issues such as religious freedom or the solidarity with Christians in need into toxic topics with which they do not want to be associated. This can even scare off representatives from within the democratic spectrum who have previously been actively involved in corresponding activities, but who do not want to be associated with the inhuman narratives of the populist forces, which have unfortunately become far too prevalent in public debate. This – conscious or unconscious – withdrawal is part of a vicious circle, as it in turn leaves room for further populist appropriations of religious freedom. Moreover, one form of collateral damage from this development is that polarisation is further increased, making the constructive discourse required for debating and solving actually existing problems increasingly difficult.

In addition to the trend towards withdrawal described above, a second form of reacting to the populist attempts at appropriation and reinterpretation is no less problematic: In some countries, it can be observed that political forces from the centre of the democratic spectrum take over or even anticipate clientelist-populist narratives and policies, virtually being driven by populism. For instance, this is reflected in political demands for disproportionate control of religious minorities or discriminatory restrictions. Such a destructive climate of discourse and such problematic proposals can contribute to establishing or perpetuating misunderstandings and resentments. If democrats themselves also resort to populist-clientelist narratives, they risk normalising such narratives and ideas, falsely giving the impression that these narratives and ideas are legitimate. Together with populist appropriation and reinterpretation, such reflexes of imitation and anticipation provide the ideal breeding

ground for discrimination, hate speech and other violations and threats to freedom of religion or belief.

Accordingly, it is important to resist the temptations to withdraw, imitate or anticipate and build broad alliances for the promotion and support freedom of religion or belief within the democratic spectrum.

Right-wing populist appropriations – Societal dynamics and reactions – approaches to solutions

Our book explores the challenge of populist appropriation of religious freedom in three steps. The aim is to help with the understanding of populist strategies of appropriation and reinterpretation by the far right and explain the goals associated with them. The first part **"Populist Reinterpretation and Appropriation of Religious Freedom Worldwide"** presents a series of concrete case studies, identifying characteristics and narratives of the populist appropriation and reinterpretation. The second part **"Societal Dynamics and Problematic Reactions towards Populist Appropriation"** demonstrates that the populist appropriation moves trigger counterproductive types of political reactions and reinforce a number of widespread misunderstandings and problematic societal dynamics, which in turn facilitate the success of populist appropriation moves. Finally, the third part **"Signs of Hope and Proposals for Solutions"** discusses possible solutions to counteract populist appropriation and strengthen religious freedom in the process. The various contributions in this book have been selected because they are particularly well suited to illustrate the essential facets of the widespread phenomenon by way of example.

The first part of the book is opened by *Bernd Hirschberger* and *Katja Voges*, who illustrate typical patterns of populist appropriation and reinterpretation moves by studying the example of far-right parties and networks in German-speaking countries, with a particular focus on the German far-right party AfD and its clientelistic and demagogic approach towards religious freedom. The authors highlight that there is a particular risk of populist appropriation moves, resulting in religious freedom being perceived as an exclusively "right-wing" topic, thus impeding advocacy for this human right free of prejudices.

In the next contribution, *Regina Elsner* analyses how the Russian Orthodox Church uses the memory of Orthodox believers being oppressed during the Soviet era to establish an understanding of religious freedom presenting

Russia – in opposition to "the West" – as the ultimate defender of Christianity and Christian values. Thereby, Elsner exposes the entanglements between the church and the state regime and shows how the argument of defending religious freedom has been made the official justification for the Russian war against Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the Hungarian government is forming strategic alliances with the leadership of the Russian Orthodoxy and Patriarch Kyrill is praising Victor Orbán for his fight for "Christian values." *Rita Perintfalvi* and *Katja Voges* show how the Hungarian president strategically instrumentalises the issue of religious freedom for his concept of illiberal Christian democracy and promotes numerous networks and international initiatives in this context. For instance, Orbán's call for solidarity with persecuted Christians worldwide is characterised by populist rhetoric.

In the next contribution, *Leandro L. B. Fontana* observes an increase in cases of religious harassment in Brazil over the past decade – especially against members of Afro-Brazilian religions – and examines how this development is linked to the increased public and political presence of Evangelicals and Pentecostals. He demonstrates that the struggle against an alleged Christophobia has become a leitmotif for them and the rise of the Christian Right and its alliance with Christian fundamentalism are the foundation for advancing a nationalist project for Brazil.

Andreas Lob-Hüdepohl shows that religious freedom has been invoked to reject government measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and that far-right movements and parties have fuelled corresponding sentiments and exploited them for their own purposes. The author places particular emphasis on weighing up in which cases references to religious freedom are legitimate in the discussed context and when – by contrast – such a reference is to be classified as abusive.

In the next contribution, *Bernd Hirschberger* and *Friedrich Püttmann* show that the topics of secularism and religious freedom are key themes in Turkish politics. While in the past Kemalist-oriented decision-makers justified autocratic restrictions by referring to the defence of secularism, today's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his party use the political instrumentalisation of the fight against Islamophobia and clientelistic references to religious freedom for their power-political interests.

T. Jeremy Gunn concludes the first part with his analysis of Donald Trump's successful campaign for the American presidential election in 2015, which he describes as one of the most important populist movements in the history of

the United States. Gunn shows how Trump instrumentalised the issues of religious freedom and religious identity before and during his presidency to mobilise white Evangelicals as a key electoral group to support him.

Heiner Bielefeldt opens the second part of the book by focussing on societal dynamics and problematic reactions towards populist appropriation. He explores how polarising views of religious freedom arise, what basic misunderstandings and misinterpretations exist and how they can be countered argumentatively.

Youssef Dennaoui then explains how anti-Muslim hostility and the appeal of Islamist groups mutually legitimise and empower each other. He describes it as highly problematic when Islamophobic prejudices and narratives fomented by the far right are also taken up or even anticipated by democrats. As – for example – the many heated discussions about mosque-building and the muezzin's call in German-speaking countries show, this leads to a dangerous normalisation and reinforcement of far-right discourses in public perception.

In France, *laïcité* has been supposed to guarantee religious freedom since the 19th century. *Valentine Zuber* delineates how right-wing populists and extremists make use of this concept to specifically exclude one religion, namely Islam. If corresponding ideas are taken up by a broader public, there is a danger that *laïcité* – as a legal principle regulating pluralism – is misused as a means of state control over religion.

Eva Maria Lassen and *Marie Juul Petersen* analyse why there has been a growing number of legal acts in Denmark in recent years that potentially threaten freedom of religion or belief, especially for Muslims. They recognise that, in addition to right-wing populist incitement, especially secularist tendencies and a religious illiteracy in Danish society have led to a willingness to restrict the free exercise of religion.

Bernd Hirschberger and *Katja Voges* then discuss the extent to which the active commitment to freedom of religion or belief at the level of the European Union has fallen victim to political polarisation. While the political right is trying to seize the issue, it seems that liberal and left-wing policymakers increasingly withdraw from open advocacy activities to promote freedom of religion or belief.

At the beginning of the third part of the book, which discusses possible solutions against populist appropriation, *Jos Douma* focuses on the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance launched by the Trump administration. As Dutch Commissioner for Freedom of Religion and Conviction, Douma represented the Dutch government in the alliance and played a decisive role in

shaping it. While initially many Western European countries in particular were sceptical about the alliance being initiated by the right-wing populist Trump administration and joined by like-minded governments, the counteracting of liberal governments prevented the alliance from taking a populist course.

Jorunn Økland shows that – unlike in other countries – the populist appropriation of religious freedom and "Christian family values" plays only a subordinate role in Norway, even in debates on gender issues. In addition to an active, broad cross-party commitment to religious freedom, real successes in achieving gender equality can also be regarded as reasons for this. However, a drop of bitterness remains, as instead of religious freedom, another human issue – gender equality – has now become a focus of populist appropriation in Norway.

Katja Buck, *Bernd Hirschberger* and *Katja Voges* recognise a special responsibility of the churches in the fight against right-wing populism and extremism, especially when religious freedom is at stake. Holding strong potential as spaces that create meaning, community and identity means that churches and religious communities have valuable resources for fighting populism sustainably, which should be considered as a moral obligation by them.

Ana Maria Daou then examines how education can mitigate and counteract the negative effects of exclusionary populist narratives. According to Daou, civil society organisations that use the human rights approach for promoting inclusive citizenship and co-existence play an essential role in creating resilience to the temptations of populism and extremism.

Finally, *Julia Bauer*, *Juliane Chakrabarti* and *Bernd Hirschberger* reflect on how and to what extent social media can act as a tool for countering populist appropriation of religious freedom and promoting human rights at the same time. While Hirschberger draws on his research on the use of social media in the context of conflict,[14] Bauer and Chakrabarti draw on their experiences from within the civil society initiative *ichbinhier e.V.*[15], which takes action against group-focused enmity and hate speech on Facebook.

14 Hirschberger, Bernd: "External Communication in Social Media During Asymmetric Conflicts: A Theoretical Model and Empirical Case Study of the Conflict in Israel and Palestine," Bielefeld: transcript 2021.

15 The name contains the German phrase *Ich bin hier* which means *I am here*.

On 14 November 2022, the German Commission for Justice and Peace and the Pontifical Mission Society *missio* Aachen hosted an online conference on "Religious Freedom and Populism." In the first part of the conference, experts from different countries presented analyses of the phenomenon of right-wing populist appropriation of religious freedom and the resulting problems. In the second part of the conference, viable options for action to counteract these tendencies were discussed. Representing German politics, Frank Schwabe, member of the German parliament and Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief, and Petra Pau, spokesperson for religious policy of the parliamentary group DIE LINKE ("The Left") in the German parliament and Vice-President of the German parliament, took part in this exchange. Recordings of most of the conference contributions are available in the original language on the YouTube channel of the German Commission for Justice and Peace:

- Contributions in German: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLcbxcwpYJUoEFyppjxAjtCQezYp96enGF
- Contributions in English: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLcbxcwpYJUoFfm_Riv25Ur9kjQVAZwX9X

The results of this conference have also been used during the preparations for this book.