

# The Christian Right in Germany

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The Federal Republic of Germany is a federally structured parliamentary democracy and social constitutional state. Within the two parliaments that are elected proportionally, the long-standing members of the Bundestag are the Social Democrats (SPD; 2021 federal election: 25.7% of the votes), the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU; 2021 federal election: 24.1%), the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP; 2021 federal election: 11.5%), Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Alliance 90/The Greens; 2021 federal election: 14.8%), and the socialist Die Linke (The Left; 2021 federal election: 4.9%, in parliament via direct mandates). Since 2017, the right-wing populist and in parts extreme-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD; Alternative for Germany), founded in 2013, has also been represented in the Bundestag (2021 federal election: 10.3%).

In the *Motherland of the Reformation*, the Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations are approximately equal in size. The Roman Catholic Church is represented through the Deutsche Bischofskonferenz (German Bishops' Conference), while most of the Protestants are represented through the regional churches belonging to the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD; Protestant Church in Germany). According to the Eurobarometer Survey (Bundeszentrale 2020), in 2018, 28.6% of the population described themselves as Catholics, 25.8% as Protestants, 2.2% as Orthodox, 7.6% as members of another Christian denomination, 3.5% as Muslims, 0.7% as Buddhists, 0.1% as Jews, 0.1% as Hindus, and 26.9% as non-believers, while 2.3% answered "other" and 2.2% "don't know." The regional differences between East and West Germany are large. While in the territory of the former German Democratic Republic, the vast majority regard themselves as non-believers (68.3%), in the territory of the old Federal Republic of Germany (1949–1990), 74% of the population still consider themselves Christians. In Germany, there is long-standing, reliable ecumenical cooperation between the major Christian churches, which ultra-conservative fundamentalist groups do *not* join or favor.

While the German Constitution is religiously and ideologically neutral, it strives to maintain a so-called *positive neutrality* toward religious communities. Thus, the state maintains a partnership with the major religious communities, letting them offer religious education in public schools and theological studies at public universities, as well as *outsourcing* a large part of social services to them. The state also collects a membership fee through a tax for those religious communities that are accepted as *public corporations*, such as the Roman Catholic Church and the regional churches belonging to the EKD.

This reliable cooperation reduces the susceptibility of committed Christians in Germany to religious fundamentalism. However, fundamentalist Christians, as well as protagonists of the extreme right, use this as their main gateway for their accusation that the big Christian churches in Germany are succumbing to the *Zeitgeist* and are “*marionettes*” of a “*red-green dictatorship*”.

## The religious protagonists: Their strategies, media, and networking

Since the emergence of the internet in the late 1990s, two concurrent and interlinked networking movements can be observed in Germany and in large parts of the German-speaking world: (1) the development of interdenominational networking between ultra-conservative/fundamentalist Christian groups of different Christian denominations (which in former times accused one another of being heretical and therefore did not collaborate with one another); (2) collaborations of such groups and interdenominational alliances with politically extreme right-wing media, groups, and parties (Strube 2014).

### Ultra-conservative and fundamentalist Christians as minorities in each denomination

Within each of the major denominations represented in Germany—Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and various Evangelical and Free Churches—some ultra-conservative and at the same time politically extreme right-wing Christian groups (subsequently called *right-wing Christians*) can be identified. In addition, some individual members of certain Christian minority groups (e.g., Orthodox and Russian-speaking Free churches) have engaged in these processes of political radicalization. At the same time, right-wing Christians are still small minorities within their churches, and no Christian denomination, large church, or movement (e.g., Evangelicalism or Pietism; cf.

Pieck 2015; Heimowski and Markstein 2020; Dietz 2022) can be described as fundamentally or predominantly right-wing Christian.

Corresponding to global developments, the *demarcation line* between ultra-conservative/fundamentalist right-wing Christians, on the one hand, and moderate conservative or more liberal religious currents, on the other, runs not along denominational lines but crosswise through each Christian denomination. Whereas the reasons for good interdenominational collaborations of liberal Christians are to be found in the long-lasting endeavors of the ecumenical movement, the political collaborations of right-wing Christians—also called an “ecumenism of hate” (Spadaro and Figueroa 2017)—are a relatively new phenomenon, which can be observed worldwide, connecting even the US–American and Russian Christian Right (e.g., RGOW [2018], with articles by Stoeckl, Elsner, Wasmuth, and others).

This observation once again confirms the insight of Gordon W. Allport that religiosity of any denomination can “make or unmake prejudices” (Allport 1954, 444). It is therefore less a matter of the concrete content of faith or church structures but rather of the basic authoritarian or egalitarian patterns underlying the respective religiosity (Strube 2021b, 2021c). This also explains the phenomenon of interdenominational alliances between right-wing fundamentalist groups, which actually accuse each other of heresy on a theological level.

## Instrumentalization of religion through the political right

Complementary to this, although clearly distinguishable from it, we can observe a turn to Christian and ecclesiastical themes in some milieus of the political extreme right. This turn had already begun in the 1990s, and since the mid-2000s, it has discovered the agitation field of anti-genderism (Hark and Villa 2015; Strube 2015, 2017a, and 2019). New-Right and extreme-right media, such as *Junge Freiheit*, *eigentümlich frei*, *Blaue Narzisse*, *Freie Welt*, *PI-News*, and *Compact-Magazin*, have started to report positively on right-wing Christian actions. Currently, some protagonists of the extreme right in Germany, as well as the AfD, give themselves a Christian image (Claussen et al. 2021). The tactical background of this politically motivated turning toward Christianity is the endeavor to reduce, undermine, and erode the—up to now—relatively strong tendencies of the majority of the German population to distance themselves from the extreme right, as the far-right thought leader Götz Kubitschek himself explains (Kubitschek 2019). Less extreme populist instrumentalizations of

Christian symbols and narratives can also be found in conservative political parties and milieus.

### Right-wing Christian alliances

The formation of right-wing Christian alliances takes place mainly digitally, via right-wing Christian websites, blogs, chats, etc., which are often run by individuals, even if they give the impression of representing a large movement. This leads to new forms of virtual communities with potential global outreach. People who stand alone with their opinions in their direct environment can successfully network globally and feel part of a large movement (Strube 2021d). Current major advances in translation technologies make it possible to present a website in several languages without foreign language skills. At the same time, a few protagonists of a scene can artificially create the impression of a grassroots movement by running numerous websites (i.e., *astroturfing*; Strube 2017b: 60–63).

In addition to virtual communities, there are also some right-wing oriented parishes or persons within the Roman Catholic Church and the EKD that represent a challenge to the church leadership, such as the Catholic *Philipp Neri Institut* in Berlin, pastor Olaf Latzel in Bremen, some priestly confraternities (e.g., unofficial groups such as *Communio veritatis* [communioveritatis.de], but also the *Priestly Fraternity of St. Pius X* [FSSPX]; cf. Steinhauer 2002; Damberg 2009), and initiatives such as the *Forum Deutscher Katholiken* (Forum of German Catholics), whose board members are almost all authors of the New-Right weekly newspaper *Junge Freiheit*. Some of the new spiritual communities are very authoritarian and therefore have strong affinities with right-wing positions (e.g., the *Opus Sanctorum Angelorum* and the *Legionaries of Christ with Regnum Christi*; Reisinger and Röhl [2021], 83–108 and 124–151). Right-wing Catholic milieus have in common that they are critical or openly hostile to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), have an affinity toward religious traditionalism as well as religious and political anti-modernism, and sympathize with the schismatic *Ecône* movement (FSSPX) and other traditionalist associations, such as *Una Voce* and *Pro Missa Tridentina*.

Within the evangelical sphere, some protagonists of the *Evangelische Allianz in Deutschland*, the biggest network of evangelical communities in Germany, had already cooperated with the New-Right weekly newspaper *Junge Freiheit* in the 1990s (Kornexl 2008; see below). This was mainly carried out by the editor-in-chief of the news agency IDEA e.V., Helmut Matthies, and its managing di-

rector, Hartmut Steeb (Kornexl 2008; Strube 2014). In recent years, this commitment has been increasingly criticized by the EKD and also within the Alliance, sometimes leading to public distancing (e.g., EAD 2020; cf. Heimowski and Markstein 2020; Dietz 2022).

Today, house groups, extended families, and free congregations can also be found within the evangelical spectrum, including among the evangelical Free churches in various regions of Germany, which have radicalized in recent years by committing themselves to the AfD, PEGIDA, and the so-called *Querdenker* anti-vaccination movement, even calling the Federal Republic of Germany a dictatorship (Greifenstein 2020). In part, they are perceived as problematic by congregations and larger church umbrella organizations. At the same time, however, there is a lack of clear and resolute opposition to right-wing statements in many parishes and among some church authorities because of a need for harmony or a misunderstanding of Christian charity, which eventually encourages right-wing opinions (Greifenstein 2020). Furthermore, there are some pastors and preachers who operate on their own on the internet, beyond church institutions and structures and without commissioning, and who have founded their own *parishes*—digitally or in real life (e.g., Christian Stockmann with his *Mandelzweigemeinde*; see Greifenstein 2020; e.g. *Baptistenkirche Zuverlässiges Wort / Faithful Word* in Pforzheim).

## Right-wing Christian social media as the main protagonists

Because the formation of right-wing Christian alliances takes place mainly digitally, social media belong to the most important protagonists of the Christian Right in Germany. In the mid-1990s, the New-Right weekly newspaper *Junge Freiheit* (*JF*) sought and established cooperation with authors of the right-wing Christian spectrum, in addition to traditionalist Catholic individuals, especially the news agency IDEA e.V., which is close to the *Evangelische Allianz in Deutschland* (Strube 2014; Kornexl 2008). Since then, there has been continuous and mutual cooperation between *JF* and the IDEA e.V. editorial staff. For some years, in the news sections of the website of the *Evangelische Allianz in Deutschland*, numerous texts, mainly about Islam and persecutions of Christians, were republished that had originally been written for *JF* and other, partly anonymous, extreme-right blogs, until effective contradiction from the EKD, the cancellation of financial support for IDEA e.V., and controversial discussions within the Alliance led to a certain insight and change in 2018.

In the Roman Catholic sphere, the private Austrian website *kath.net* (financially supported by *Kirche in Not* [Church in Need] and the *Legionaries of Christ*) has been the most important German-speaking *bridging medium* (for the term *Brückenmedium*, see Pfeiffer 2001) since 1999/2000, introducing Catholics, in cooperation with the IDEA e.V. news agency, to New-Right media, content, and positions and, since 2013, to the AfD. The same dynamics apply to *katholisch-es.info*, *philosophia-perennis.com* (run by David Berger), *gloria.tv* (founded by the priests Reto Nay and Markus Doppelbauer), and, in particular, the private and interdenominational blog *Christliches Forum* (*christlichesforum.info*), which links to numerous New-Right and Christian-Right media. This blog is run by Felicitas Küble, who is manager of the *Christoferuswerk*, is involved in organizing the prayer march *1000 Kreuze für das Leben* (1000 Crosses for Life, organized by EuroProLife/europrolife.com), and writes for several New-Right and extreme-right media, including *PI-News* (Strube 2015; Küble 2017). These and other private right-wing blogs, forums, digital associations, and so-called *institutes* often refer to each other and become central *alternative* sources of (dis)information within the Christian-Right and New-Right scene.

Between 2004 and 2012, the anonymous private Catholic website *kreuz.net* disseminated explicitly anti-constitutional extremist content, demagogic hate speech, antisemitism, and Holocaust denial. Nevertheless, the reactionary *Netzwerk katholischer Priester* (Network of Catholic Priests; *priesternetzwerk.net*), as well as the traditionalist Institut *Philipp Neri* (*institut-philipp-neri.de*) and the former *Institut Sinfonia Sacra*, supported this platform through advertisements (Strube 2014), and the auxiliary bishop Athanasius Schneider in Kazakhstan published on this website. In 2013, the law enforcement authorities were able to identify two Roman Catholic priests, who also run the far-right website *gloria.tv*, as the operators of *kreuz.net*.

In recent years, an internationalization (primarily through text adoptions from US websites such as *Church Militant* and *Lifesitenews*) as well as an intellectualization can be observed in parts of the German-speaking Christian Right. Websites choose the name *institute* and publish long texts with many footnotes and references, which can only be unmasked as pseudo-scientific after a thorough and knowledgeable reading. Examples of this are the website called *St. Boniface Institute* (*boniface-institute.com*), founded by the Austrian Alexander Tschugguel, who is close to *Tradition, Family and Property* (TFP; White 2019; for more about TFP, see below) and works together with far-right protagonists and media (e.g., Steve Bannon [2021] and the far-right website *info-direkt.eu* [2021]); and the traditionalist website *thecathwalk.de*, affiliated to

the FSSPX, whose links to the political right are established through authors from—or in favor of—the political right spectrum (AfD, the Austrian far-right party FPÖ, etc.). A weblog called *Renovatio Institute* ([renovatio.org](http://renovatio.org)), run by Simon Wunder and Christian Machek, who takes part in panel discussions with Marion Maréchal from the French Rassemblement National (Collegium 2021) and whose so-called scientific advisory board was dominated by ideas of the far-right historian David Engels (cf. Pfahl-Traughber 2021; Linden 2021), popped up in 2020 with numerous pseudo-theological articles and disappeared suddenly in spring 2023.

Thus, a pseudo-scientific parallel structure to educational institutions, academies, and universities has been established (at least virtually), which works in a well-founded scientific manner and is similar to what Weronika Grzebalska and Andrea Pető have described for Poland and Hungary under the term *polypore-science* (Pető 2021, 193–198). The attempt to intellectualize their positions corresponds to the repertoire of strategies of the intellectual New Right and is oriented toward the establishment of so-called *alternative media* and the creation of *alternative facts*, as took place in the USA under the presidency of Donald Trump.

The thematic foci of the predominantly male-run websites *thecathwalk.de*, *boniface-institute.com*, and *renovatio.org* are the reestablishment of the Old/Tridentine Mass, anti-gender activism, the commitment to the restoration of patriarchal social structures, and an anti-Islamic crusade-inspired view of Europe as the *Christian West threatened by Islam*.

## Anti-gender activism/Anti-genderism

Important right-wing Christian players in terms of international networking are to be found in the field of anti-gender activism. Gabriele Kuby, whose books have been translated into numerous European languages since 2006, acts as a thought leader and guarantor of content among the Christian Right as well as in political far-right circles. In German-speaking countries, Birgit Kelle is also known for her anti-genderist publications. Like her husband Klaus Kelle and Gabriele Kuby, she publishes in numerous New-Right media (e.g., *Freie Welt*, *JE*, *eigentümlich frei*, *Achse des Guten*, and the online magazine of the Kopp publishing house) and takes part in several international anti-genderist congresses.

Since 2006, the initiative *EuroProLife* has regularly organized the prayer march 1000 Kreuze für das Leben in various cities, which is partly infiltrated or even co-organized by activists from the extreme right, e.g. the *Bürgerinitiative Ausländerstopp* (citizen's initiative against foreigners). While the organizers have not distanced themselves from these infiltrations, some Catholic dioceses have distanced themselves from these prayer marches (Erzdiözese München Freising 2009). Another anti-gender activist, the German–Russian Mathias Ebert, is a member of Ivo Sasek's Swiss sect *Organische Christus Generation* (ocg.life),

*Organische Christus Generation* (ocg.life), as well as his Holocaust-denying Anti-Zensur-Koalition (Anti-Censorship Coalition – anti-zensur.info) and his online-channel Kla.tv. In 2014–2015, Ebert organized several anti-genderist demonstrations in major German cities in the name of his blog *Besorgte Eltern* (Concerned Parents), together with the German–Russian *Arminiusbund*, which is close to the anti-constitutional extremist NPD party, and in cooperation with the far-right Jürgen Elsässer and Pegida, with reporting by *Russia Today* (RT). Ebert's anti-genderist networking activities fit with and were part of Sasek's antisemitic esoteric and conspiracist cross-media networking (for further information: Pöhlmann 2023).

One of the most visible anti-genderist manifestations in Germany is the *Demo für alle* (Demo for All; demofueralle.de), which, since 2014, has been organized by Hedwig von Beverfoerde, a member of the AfD-affiliated *Initiative Familien-Schutz* (Initiative Family Protection; familien-schutz.de), which is currently run by the husband of AfD politician Beatrix v. Storch, figurehead of the so-called Christians in the AfD. Between 2014 and 2017, Beverfoerde organized demonstrations with from several hundred to a maximum of 5,000 participants, inviting speakers from the CDU, churches (e.g., Hartmut Steeb [former Secretary General of the *Evangelische Allianz in Deutschland*], Andreas Laun [former Catholic auxiliary bishop of Salzburg], and Karin Maria Fenbert [former managing director of the German section of the Catholic aid organization *Kirche in Not*]), and the AfD. Groups of members of the extreme-right identitarian movement regularly took part in the demonstrations. Probably due to a lack of participants—and also owing to the above-mentioned intellectualization—the activities have shifted to an annual *symposium*, which is financially supported by *CitizenGo*, as well as by the Catholic newspaper *Tagespost* and the New-Right *JF* (Beverfoerde 2019). Beverfoerde, a Catholic and a member of the CDU until the end of 2016, works closely with Sven and Beatrix von Storch in their network of campaigns (Strube 2017b, 2019). She

also coordinated, together with Beatrix von Storch, the German section of the European citizens' initiatives *One of Us* and *Mum, Dad & Kids*. Andreas Kemper's research (2019) shows that a large part of the anti-gender protagonists come from the nobility and are related to each other.

A brief glimpse at the list of the *alliance partners* of the Demo für alle reveals other anti-genderism players in Germany, but, at the same time, this proves to be astroturfing. Among the 29 listed virtual initiatives (as of January 11, 2022), at least three are significantly run by Beverfoerde. Two currently operate under Sven von Storch's name and address. Several websites represent the virtual activities of individuals (e.g., Gabriele Kuby, Prof. Dr. Manfred Spieker, Dr. Albert Wunsch, and Birgit Kelle) or refer solely to a magazine series. Six virtual initiatives consist of anonymous blogs, Facebook pages, or abandoned domains, or they cannot be found independently of the Demo für alle. Two of the three Austrian websites are run by Leni Kesselstadt. Only three supporters point beyond the inner circle of the demonstration's initiators toward parties and churches: two CDU-affiliated initiatives in Baden-Württemberg (Evangelischer Arbeitskreis and the Christian Democrats for Life [CDL] Baden-Württemberg) and the *Forum Deutscher Katholiken*. International support and networking are provided by *CitizenGo*.

Others, such as the *Aktion Kinder in Gefahr* (Children in Danger; aktion-kig.eu), headed by Mathias von Gersdorff, consist mainly of a blog as well as some internet petitions and promote various anti-abortion actions such as *1000 Kreuze, 40 Tage für das Leben* (40 Days for Life), and the Demo für alle. Older versions of the *Aktion Kinder in Gefahr* website linked to the website of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Tradition, Familie und Privateigentum e.V.* (German Society for Tradition, Family and Property [TFP]), chaired by Mathias von Gersdorff, as well as to its US, Austrian, French, Italian, and Polish branches and alliance partners.

The international TFP was assessed by sociologist Karin Priester in 2009 as a "right-wing extremist sect" (Priester 2009, 15), and its German website contains articles with anti-democratic content (e.g., "Dictatorship of Equality" [Solimeo n.d.] and "Dictatorship of Tolerance" [Ureta n.d.]). While the TFP (together with its website *herz-jesu-apostolat.org*) is an unknown micro association in Germany whose public activities hardly go beyond producing blog texts and short videos, mainly by Mathias von Gersdorff, it is relevant because it operates in networks under various names and is politically influential in other countries (e.g., *CivitasCristiana.nl* in the Netherlands and *Ordoiuris.pl* in Poland;

the Croatian organization *Vigilare.hr* also uses the emblem of the TFP; see also [tfp.at/links](http://tfp.at/links)).

## Narratives and ideology

The most important topic for the collaboration between right-wing Christians and protagonists of the New Right in Germany is anti-genderism/anti-gender activism (Hark and Villa 2015). It is insinuated that the various feminist or queer activists or persons who are engaged in gender equality form a globally collaborating *gender lobby* with a homogeneous *gender ideology*, aiming to establish a *totalitarian new world order* financially supported by multi-billionaires such as George Soros. This is clearly an antisemitic conspiracy narrative. Additionally, we find the anti-Muslim narrative of *Christian Occident versus Islam*, which is linked to the topic of *persecution of Christians*. Anti-genderism triggers a large range of different prejudices and hostilities (cf. Strube 2021a). Religious points of contact for Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism are the exclusivist conviction that the Christian faith is the only true one, with Islam seen as an erroneous belief or even *ideology* that must be fought, and a peculiar kind of Christian charity and solidarity only with persecuted Christians worldwide, which assumes that religious discrimination and harassment are almost exclusively committed by Muslims *against* Christians. These convictions are sometimes merged with a missionary zeal toward Muslims and, more often, with a general rejection of migration, culminating in the insinuation that Muslims are waging a *birth jihad*, aiming at the *decline of the Christian West*.

Moreover, such convictions increase susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs and pave the way for a conspiracy-ideological parallel society. In fact, right-wing Christian groups show a high affinity to conspiracy narratives such as the *great replacement*, the *new world order*, and the *great reset*. Since 2020, many of them, especially anti-gender activists such as *Demo für alle*, also reject anti-pandemic regulations and sympathize with the *Querdenker* (lateral thinkers), the German anti-vaccine movement. Even though these Christian groups have turned out to be insignificant both within the major churches and in the German anti-vaccine movement, the COVID-19 protests demonstrated the mobilization potential of conspiracy theories. This is especially relevant, as, after the US, Germany is suspected to have the second-largest QAnon following (CeMAS 2022).

## The political audience targeted

The political commitment of far-right Christians is primarily directed toward the implementation of ultra-conservative family policies and pro-life/anti-abortion positions, including the goal of codifying their own concepts of a *God-given natural law* not only in ecclesiastical morality but also in the legislation of Western democracies. Frequent support is also given to economically libertarian socio-Darwinian positions, while anti-discrimination legislation and, to some extent, the protection of minorities are often rejected.

In the early 2000s, right-wing Christians opposed the SPD–Green government coalition, especially its introduction of registered civil partnerships in 2001. Increasingly, criticism, opposition, and a so-called *resistance* have also been directed against the CDU, which was liberalizing on socio-political issues under Angela Merkel, and the CSU. The aim has been to influence their party programs. Since the 1980s, right-wing Christians have also organized themselves in fundamentalist micro parties (e.g., *Christliche Mitte* [Christian Center, CM] and *Partei Bibeltreuer Christen* [Party of Bible-abiding Christians, PBC]). From 2013 onwards, right-wing Christian milieus turned to the AfD and contributed significantly to its rise and image as a *civilian middle-class* and ostensibly non-extremist party, as shown above in the example of the *Demo für alle*. At the same time, the AfD has accumulated the political and social influence of right-wing Christians (Häusler, Jentsch, and Sander 2018, 22), who are a loud but small minority in Germany. Religious-sounding narratives and arguments on the part of the AfD and the formation of working groups such as Christians in the AfD ([chrafd.de](http://chrafd.de)) and even Jews in the AfD ([j-afd.org](http://j-afd.org)) have supported the impression of its being a middle-class party and enabled it to reach special conservative milieus such as German Russians (for whom the AfD even provides a Russian translation of its website: [russlanddeutsche-afd.nrw/ru/](http://russlanddeutsche-afd.nrw/ru/)). Despite the steady radicalization of the AfD, which became absolutely obvious as a result of its splits in 2015, 2017, and 2022, when Bernd Lucke, Frauke Petry, and Jörg Meuthen left the party, its support found on right-wing Christian websites (e.g., [kath.net](http://kath.net)) has remained constant, which points to a parallel radicalization within their readerships – and perhaps the silent loss of other less radical readers.

Increasingly, right-wing Christian milieus are adopting decidedly anti-democratic positions, including ideals of a Christian or Catholic (medieval) estate-based society or theocracy with the special participation of the aristocracy. Collaborations are emerging between these groups and those pro-

tagonists of the extreme New Right who are interested in the strategic use of Christian symbols and narratives (e.g., collaborations for joint publications between right-wing Christians, AfD politicians, and protagonists of the extreme right and the identitarian movement; see Dirsch, Münz, and Wawerka 2018 and 2019). International networking seems to be more important and promising than hoping to achieve political power in Germany. Right-wing Catholic groups also strive for exclusive and absolute sovereignty of interpretation within the Roman Catholic Church, which they want to restore in an anti-modernist, pre-conciliar way.

## Effects

The AfD's electoral successes in conservative regions (e.g., in southern and southwest Germany, as well as in some pious regions in Erzgebirge in Saxony) are likely to be influenced by its ostensibly *middle-class* image and thus also by support from right-wing Christian milieus (e.g., Demo für alle), while its greater successes in strongly secularized regions (especially in East Germany) are more likely to be attributed to the radical wing under Björn Höcke. Within the CDU/CSU, a controversial debate has erupted about whether AfD voters can be won back by aligning CDU/CSU positions with AfD positions or by sharply distancing themselves from the far right. In 2017, ultra-conservative members of the CDU/CSU founded the association WerteUnion (the Value Union), which collaborates in part with the AfD and which many CDU members reject because of its proximity to the AfD (Neuerer 2020; Middelhoff 2020; Parth 2022).

Since the beginning of the 2000s, we can observe an online radicalization among right-wing Christian milieus. In churches as well as in society, and increasingly under the influence of disinformation campaigns about COVID-19 measures, (still small) right-wing parallel societies are forming, which take their information exclusively from right-wing and so-called *alternative* media. However, in large parts of the churches and society, there is also a clear counter-protest against this right-wing drift, as in the spontaneous *welcome culture* toward refugees in 2015 and in protest statements and publications against right-wing populism by churches and their leaders (Migrationskommission 2019). Currently, in 2021–2023, Christian counter-protests against anti-genderism are also taking place through campaigns such as #Liebegewinnt (love wins) and #OutInChurch outinchurch.de/; Brinkschröder

et al. 2022), which receive episcopal encouragement in opposing discrimination against LGBTIQ+ persons within the Roman Catholic Church. In November 2022, even the basic Church regulations regarding employment were modified by the German Dioceses.

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