

Bernd Hirschberger, Katja Voges (eds.)

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND POPULISM

The Appropriation of a Human Right
and How to Counter It



[transcript] PoliticalScience

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Religious Freedom and Populism

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Contents

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

Conceptual Clarifications

Bernd Hirschberger and Katja Voges 13

Populist Reinterpretation and Appropriation of Religious Freedom Worldwide

Reinterpretations of Religious Freedom

by the Far Right in the German-Speaking World

The Case of the AfD

Bernd Hirschberger and Katja Voges 29

Escalating the Populist Approach

The Case of Russia and the Significance of History

Regina Elsner 41

Hungary under Viktor Orbán

“Illiberal Christian Democracy” and the Instrumentalisation of Religious Freedom

Rita Perintfalvi and Katja Voges 53

Religious Freedom for Christian Majorities

The Brazilian Case

Leandro L. B. Fontana 67

Abuse of Religious Freedom?

Ethical Preliminary Remarks on “Religion-Based” Resistance against COVID-19 Protective Measures <i>Andreas Lob-Hüdepohl</i>	79
--	----

The Political Instrumentalization of the Topics

of Secularism, Religious Freedom and Islamophobia in Turkey <i>Bernd Hirschberger and Friedrich Püttmann</i>	91
--	----

Populism, Religious Identity, and the Instrumentalization of “Religious Freedom” in the United States during the Era of Donald Trump

<i>T. Jeremy Gunn</i>	105
-----------------------------	-----

Societal Dynamics and Problematic Reactions towards Populist Appropriation

A Recipe for Political Polarization?

Tackling Distorted Views on Freedom of Religion or Belief <i>Heiner Bielefeldt</i>	121
---	-----

Religious Freedom in the Field of Tension between Populist Anti-Muslim Sentiments and Islamist Radicalisation Tendencies

Sociological Observations Using the Case of Germany <i>Youssef Dennaoui</i>	131
--	-----

Secularism in France and the Challenge of Populism

<i>Valentine Zuber</i>	143
------------------------------	-----

Restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Denmark

A Populist Move? <i>Eva Maria Lassen and Marie Juul Petersen</i>	153
---	-----

Commitment to Religious Freedom at the Level of the European Union

A Victim of Polarisation? <i>Bernd Hirschberger and Katja Voges</i>	165
--	-----

Signs of Hope and Proposals for Solutions

International Religious Freedom (or Belief) Alliance

From Populist to not yet Popular

Jos Douma 183

Populism in the Land of Equality

Cross-Party Consensus in the Face of Extremism

Jorunn Økland 199

Populist Appropriation and Reinterpretation of Religious Freedom

The Special Responsibility and Concern of the Churches
and Religious Communities

Katja Dorothea Buck, Bernd Hirschberger and Katja Voges 209

Beliefs, Brains and Breaking Chains

How Education on “Living Together” can Promote

Freedom of Religion or Belief in Lebanon amid rising Populist Narratives

Anna Maria Daou 221

Social Media as a Tool against Populist Appropriation of FoRB and for Promoting FoRB?

Challenges, Ideas and Strategies

Julia Bauer, Juliane Chakrabarti and Bernd Hirschberger 233

Conclusion: The Case of Religious Freedom and Populism

What Perspectives Can We Develop for a Constructive Culture of Discussion and Problem-Solving as well as Strengthening Human Rights?

Bernd Hirschberger and Katja Voges 247

List of Contributors 261

Acknowledgements 265

About the cover design 267

Forewords

Prof. Nazila Ghanea

(United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief)

As a human right, the freedom of thought, conscience and religion (henceforth *freedom of religion or belief*) is neither understood nor used in the same way by everyone. In fact, some weaponize it to divide, prefer, exclude or even dehumanize rather than respect, empower, support and promote inclusion.

Nonetheless, the international human rights law framework shapes freedom of religion or belief, situates it, and grounds it legally. It may be appropriated or misappropriated by different actors in different ways. However, once orphaned from its legal and normative foundations, it loses its power. More accurately, it loses its legitimate claim as an international legal human right.

This book captures the various ways in which efforts are made in many contexts around the world to appropriate this freedom to foster discrimination, exclusion and – effectively – violations of human rights. In some contexts, this effort towards appropriation is camouflaged and subtle, as it takes some legal know-how to identify and expose its faulty underpinnings. In others, it is quite blatant and even somewhat comical, whereby it doesn't take much to recognize the falsity of its claims.

One of the responsibilities upon us in relation to freedom of religion or belief in these turbulent times is to be on the lookout for such shaky claims. Having once been a somewhat specialist and rare claim, freedom of religion or belief has entered into the mainstream in many legal, political and advocacy circles. For all the opportunities that this has offered, it has also given rise to the challenge of how to deal with freedom of religion or belief's "false friends."

This book helps us to understand the underlying factors that are giving rise to the proliferation of such false friends and their related false claims, as well as analyzing and addressing them in a sober, intelligent, and resolute manner, whenever and wherever they arise.

Bishop Dr Heiner Wilmer SCJ

(President of the German Commission for Justice and Peace)

Reverend Dirk Bingener(President of the Pontifical Mission Society *missio* Aachen)

Human rights are a thorn in the side of right-wing populists and extremists. Human rights are committed to the dignity of every individual and – as universal rights of freedom and equality – stand in stark contrast to the exclusivist power interests of revisionist forces, not least due to their high emancipatory potential. They are not compatible with the misanthropic, discriminatory ideologies that these forces use to justify or disguise their power interests or that they even believe and live out of radical delusion.

In this context, corresponding actors typically do not openly denounce human rights. Instead, their fight against human rights takes on a more subtle form that is no less perilous: rather than calling for the abolition of human rights, they simply reinterpret them in terms of their own ideologies and power interests. Violations of human dignity are put into fine words, with the goal being a creeping degradation that obliterates human rights in their genuine essence to the point of unrecognizability and in many respects turns them into their opposite. Understanding the patterns and strategies of appropriation and distortion is essential to effectively counteract them and ensure that human rights can fulfill their potential. This book makes a crucial contribution in this regard by focusing on a human right that is particularly often the target of populist attempts of appropriation and reinterpretation by the far right around the world, namely freedom of religion or belief.

To understand why and how populist appropriations succeed, it is insufficient to describe their rhetorical patterns. Rather, it is crucial to also grasp the social context in which the appropriation takes place and analyze what dynamics emerge from it. Regarding the freedom of religion or belief, it can be observed that political forces from the far right present themselves as defenders of this human right and as “true conservatives,” and that religious freedom often has a somewhat dusty reputation in the societies of Western Europe and North America, which have become increasingly secular. The right is sometimes incorrectly perceived as an antiquated relic. Commitment to religious freedom is then misunderstood as conservative clientelistic politics. Some even raise the question of whether religious freedom is still needed in a secular society. There are a number of widespread misunderstandings be-

hind this: freedom of religion or belief is not a protective program for outdated structures, but rather a right to freedom that enables everyone to practice a religion or belief freely. It is about the possibility of forming and expressing one's own beliefs and convictions, and thus seeking answers to fundamental questions of human existence. Here, an essential dimension of human existence is fulfilled for religious as well as non-religious people. Freedom of religion or belief touches us all, and without it the canon of universal human rights would not be complete.

It is not in the interest of populists to resolve these misconceptions. On the contrary, the withdrawal of democratic forces from open involvement in promoting freedom of religion or belief and the increasing polarization of the debate are playing into the hands of the extreme right. Thus, religious freedom is coming under pressure from two sides and is in danger of being damaged. This is partly the case because the dynamics described above make it difficult to find constructive solutions to problems and tensions that exist in the context of religion, such as the question of how to deal with religiously motivated violence.

We would therefore like to express our sincere thanks to the authors of this book for presenting not only competent analyses of the problems but also concrete approaches to counteracting populist appropriation, strengthening freedom of religion or belief and shaping a culture of debate that enables constructive and productive solutions to even sensitive problems.

Countering populist appropriation and misinterpretation and strengthening human rights is a task for society as a whole. At the same time, the Christian churches have a special responsibility. Particularly when it comes to the populist appropriation of religious freedom, we are called upon to oppose it in the clearest possible terms and raise awareness of the problems associated with such narratives and resentments, not least when they are spreading in the context of church communities and structures. In a time marked by numerous crises, there is also a pressing imperative to enable us as churches in Western Europe to offer people in search of meaning, orientation and community a real alternative to the false promises and sham solutions of the populists and extremists.

About the Pontifical Mission Society *missio* Aachen:

The Pontifical Mission Society *missio* Aachen (German: *Internationales Katholisches Missionswerk missio e.V.*) was founded in 1832 and is the world church partner of the local churches in Africa, Asia and Oceania. Every year, the aid agency supports about 1,000 projects of its partners in the areas of education and training, pastoral, social and interreligious work as well as infrastructure. As a specialised agency for international church cooperation, *missio* is one of more than 100 papal mission agencies worldwide. *missio* considers the mutual exchange of experience between the local churches as a community of learning, prayer and solidarity as essential. The human right to religious freedom is a priority issue. *missio* carries out information and education work, builds national and international networks of church, civil society and political actors at home and abroad and mobilises people to campaign for religious freedom worldwide.

About the German Commission for Justice and Peace:

The German Commission for Justice and Peace (German: *Deutsche Kommission Justitia et Pax*) was founded in 1967 and considers itself to be the joint forum of Catholic institutions and organizations active in the field of international responsibility of the Church in Germany. The German Commission for Justice and Peace is their common voice in society and politics and thus an agent of societal and political dialogue. The commission elaborates contributions to Germany's development cooperation, peace and human rights policies and develops concepts for the international work of the Catholic Church. For years, a basso continuo of the human rights work of the German Commission for Justice and Peace has been the commitment to the freedom of religion or belief as a human right. At the same time, the aim of the commission's work is to identify new or hitherto unjustly neglected issues and – in cooperation with international partners – develop innovative concepts and proposals for problem-solving.

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

Conceptual Clarifications

Bernd Hirschberger and Katja Voges

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 democracy² 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-

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- 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 change³ 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

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-A-G-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

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 nationally 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 replacement¹² 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=PLcbxcwpYJUoEFyppjxAjtCQezYp96enCF>
- Contributions in English:
https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLcbxcwpYJUoFfm_Riv25U9kjQVAZwX9X

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

Populist Reinterpretation and Appropriation of Religious Freedom Worldwide

Reinterpretations of Religious Freedom by the Far Right in the German-Speaking World

The Case of the AfD

Bernd Hirschberger and Katja Voges

On 27th January 2023, for the first time a motion was on the agenda of the German parliament calling for the introduction of an International Day against the Persecution of Christians. This motion was introduced by the far-right¹ party Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD).² In the debate, it became obvious that while all other parliamentary groups in the *Bundestag* (Parliament) perceive the discrimination and persecution of Christians as a mas-

1 While the party was initially described as „right-wing populist” in many media reports, experts now classify the AfD party, which was founded in 2013, as clearly right-wing extremist: In Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia and Saxony, the state branches of the AfD have been classified as “firmly right-wing extremist” by the offices for the protection of the constitution (German: *Verfassungsschutz*) of the respective federal states. A good summary of the right-wing extremist characteristics of the party can be found in the justification for this decision by the Saxon State Office for the Protection of the Constitution: Sächsische Staatskanzlei: Sächsischer AfD-Landesverband als gesichert rechtsextremistische Bestrebung eingestuft (8 Dec. 2023), <https://www.medien-service.sachse.n.de/medien/news/1071656>, accessed on: 21 Dec. 2023. The German Institute for Human Rights even states that the legal requirements for a ban on the party under the terms of Article 21 of the *Grundgesetz* (German constitution) are met: Cremer, Hendrik: Warum die AfD verboten werden könnte. Empfehlungen an Staat und Politik, Berlin: Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte 2023, <https://www.institut-fuer-menschenrechte.de/publikationen/detail/warum-die-afd-verboten-werden-koennte>, accessed on: 21 Dec. 2023. The AfD responded to this critical legal assessment by submitting a motion to the Bundestag to cut off the Institute’s federal funding and withdraw its status as a national human rights institution: Deutscher Bundestag: Debatte zum Deutschen Institut für Menschenrechte (22 Jun. 2023), <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/txarchiv/2023/kw25-de-institut-menschenrechte-954396>, accessed on: 21 Dec. 2023.

2 BT-Drucksache 20/5368 (printed matter Bundestag).

sive problem, they see the AfD's motion as an instrumentalisation of religious freedom for their own political agenda and a dangerous polarisation between different faith communities. The incident exemplifies the approach of right-wing populist and extremist parties and networks in German-speaking countries to narrow religious freedom to the issue of persecution of Christians and thereby reinterpret it in terms of their right-wing ideologies; for example by referring to an alleged defence of Christian culture and values of the Western world. Their goal in doing so is to gain support among the broader population and introduce and anchor their own ideological concerns in the public debate. This chapter analyses which patterns are central to these attempts at appropriation and reinterpretation, focusing on the AfD as a case study. However, similar patterns can also be observed in other right-wing parties and movements in German-speaking countries.³

Clientelistic interpretation

When the AfD turns to the issue of religious freedom, it is usually concerned with the rights and privileges of a single religious group. Selectively, it directs the focus on Christianity as the historical majority religion, often referring to a traditionalist understanding of Christianity in its supposedly original and true form, which offers many points of contact for right-wing ideologies in particular.⁴ Because corresponding traditionalist views are repeatedly the subject of public criticism, the AfD portrays Christianity as threatened or even persecuted by a supposed "left-green mainstream" in Germany and other Western European countries.⁵ Often the focus here is not on religion in the narrower

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- 3 In part, this chapter takes up considerations and formulations that Bernd Hirschberger established for the chapter "Religious Freedom and Right-Wing Populism" of the 3rd 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.
 - 4 Hidalgo, Oliver/Hildmann, Philipp W./Yendell, Alexander (eds.): Rechtspopulismus und Religion. Wiesbaden: Springer VS 2018 (= Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik. Issue 2/2018).
 - 5 However, this ignores the fact that although the exercise of the right to freedom of religion or belief is by no means generally dependent on a liberal attitude or a basic attitude that promotes human rights (Bielefeldt, Heiner/Wiener, Michael: Religionsfreiheit auf dem Prüfstand. Konturen eines umkämpften Menschenrechts, Bielefeldt:

sense, but rather culture and tradition.⁶ There is repeatedly talk of defending the “Christian Occident” and there are loud demands for a “Christian German *Leitkultur*” and the protection of supposed “traditional Christian values.” However, what is meant by “*Leitkultur*” and “traditional values” is often not spelled out in detail.⁷ Ultimately, these patterns of justification aim at the preservation or (re-)establishment of structural inequalities that go hand in hand with discrimination against one or various minorities.

For Christianity as the original majority religion (interpreted by the AfD in terms of its own traditionalist-nationalist distorted image of Christianity), a dominant status is demanded, while religious freedom for other religions is placed under a cultural reservation. The image of the enemy is Islam in particular, which is presented as a monolithic entity and a threat to one’s own culture.⁸ Following the logic of their own ideological-nationalist exclusion, they call for sweeping measures that would mean systematic unequal treatment of Muslim religious groups compared to other religious communities. The AfD’s manifesto for the 2021 Bundestag elections makes numerous demands that relate exclusively to Islam and not to other religious communities, focusing in particular on bans on publicly visible Muslim symbols such as minarets and the call of

transcript 2020, p. 99), freedom of religion or belief as a right to freedom nevertheless allows criticism of corresponding traditionalist views.

- 6 Indeed, in 2016, the then deputy federal spokesman and later party and parliamentary group leader of the AfD Alexander Gauland told *Christ & Welt* that his party was not concerned with Christianity per se, but rather with a “traditional attitude to life” and pointed out that the references in the AfD’s party programme to Christianity were more cultural than religious: Löbber, Raoul/Machowecz, Martin: “Interview: Gehört die AfD auf den Katholikentag?” (25 May 2016), <https://www.zeit.de/2016/23/leipzig-afd-katholikentag-streitgesprach>, accessed on: 18 Feb. 2023.
- 7 The fact that the semantics are so diffuse makes it possible to connect with different milieus, with traditionalist Christians, more atheistically oriented “cultural Christians” as well as identitarians seeking meaning; see Diefenbach, Aletta J.: “Wie viel Christentum steckt in der Heimatliebe? Potentiale und Grenzen des Christentums für eine kollektive Identität der Neuen Rechte,” in: Birgit Blätzel-Mink (ed.), *Gesellschaft unter Spannung. Verhandlungen des 40. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie 2020*, Mannheim: GESIS – Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften e.V. 2021.
- 8 Bitzl, Christoph, “Rechtsextreme Muslimhetze: Die Instrumentalisierung von Religion als Vote-Seeking-Strategie der AfD,” in: *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 5 (2021), pp. 471–502.

the muezzin:⁹ “Minarets and the call of the muezzin are not compatible with a tolerant coexistence of religions as practised by the Christian churches.”¹⁰ Instead of applying the same standards of administrative law to minarets and the call of the muezzin as to church towers and the ringing of bells (for example regarding questions of building law and immission control), the AfD thus denies Muslims the universal claims from the *forum externum*, that is the right to practise one’s own faith even in public.¹¹ At the same time, the same rights are recognised and demanded for Christianity, in other words for the religion with which most AfD members themselves feel culturally and/or religiously connected. Apart from the idea that this is necessary to protect against a supposed Muslim “claim to power over the Christian majority society,” among the justifications for such unequal treatment there are no less problematic assertions such as that “religion is exclusively a private matter” and that its “practice [...] should not take place in public places,”¹² a statement that denies the *forum externum* in its core.

This logic of unequal treatment and generalising suspicion is also reflected in the proposal to ban the so-called political Islam.¹³ Finally, the undifferentiated formulation that political engagement motivated by the Muslim faith is

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- 9 Quotes that have not been published in English have been translated into English by the authors of the chapter.
- 10 Programme of the AfD for the Election to the 20th German Bundestag: Alternative für Deutschland (AfD): Deutschland. Aber normal. Programm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl zum 20. Deutschen Bundestag, p. 86, https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/20210611_AfD_Programm_2021.pdf, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.
- 11 For the legal background, see Hense, Ansgar: “Der islamische Gebetsruf,” in: CIBEDO-Beiträge (1/2021); see also Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.): Moscheebau in Deutschland. Eine Orientierungshilfe (= Die deutschen Bischöfe Nr. 88), Bonn 2008; Terbuyken, Hanno: “AfD und Religionsfreiheit: Gefährliche Grundhaltung,” (2 May 2016), <https://www.evangelisch.de/inhalte/134158/02-05-2016/afd-parteitag-kommentar-religionsfreiheit-islam-deutschland>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.
- 12 This is the wording of the Hessian regional association of the AfD on its website: <https://www.afd-hessen.de/aktuelles/2020/07/39717/>, accessed on: 14 Dec. 2022.
- 13 In addition to the AfD, other conservative and right-wing forces in Germany, Austria and Switzerland have formulated similar demands, for example the then Federal Chancellor of the Republic of Austria Sebastian Kurz, who announced in 2020 that he wanted to enforce a criminal offence of “political Islam,” or the “Christian Social Union” in Bavaria: Christlich Soziale Union (CSU): Beschluss des CSU-Parteitags am 4./5. November 2016 in München. Leitantrag – Politischer Islam, <https://www.csu.de/politik/beschlusse/leitantrag-politischer-islam/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

per se bad, harmful or even a threat implies an equation with the practices and ideologies of Islamist extremism and the influence of autocratic governments from abroad that endangers democracy and human rights. This indirectly not only relativises the actual dangers but also constitutes an inadmissible unequal treatment and restriction of freedom. After all, hardly anyone demands that Christian faith should not be a motivation for politics; for instance regarding the strong role of Christian democracy in Central European politics.

Strategic mixing of legitimate criticism with right-wing ideological narratives

Clearly inhumane and discriminatory statements and demands by the AfD and its representatives regarding Islam are sometimes relativised elsewhere, albeit often only at a later stage. For example, there is the statement that Islam is “not just a religion” but “a political system that is neither compatible with our constitution nor with European secularisation” by federal leader Alice Weidel and former AfD candidate for the post of Bundestag Vice-President Albrecht Glaser from 2017.¹⁴ Besides there is the statement by then deputy leader Beatrix von Storch from 2018 that the AfD is a “party for religious freedom” and that there are “many integrated Muslims and migrants in our society” who could also find a political home in the AfD, as long as they do not advocate “Islamisation” in the sense of pushing back German culture and claiming dominance.¹⁵ Ultimately, however, the difference between Islam and Islamism is polemically negated.¹⁶ The occasional complementary self-framing as a moderate, bour-

14 Kamann, Matthias: “... was hier unter dem Deckmantel der Religionsfreiheit abläuft” (16 Nov. 2017), <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/plus170637216/was-hier-unter-dem-Deckmantel-der-Religionsfreiheit-ablaeuft.html>; accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023, other AfD mandate holders even go so far as to deny that Islam is a religion at all and claim that it is only a “political ideology”: Klatt, Thomas: “Die AfD und das Christentum” (7 May 2018), <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/religion-in-der-politik-die-afd-und-das-christentum-100.html>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023. However, this is not at all compatible with the broad understanding of religion that underlies freedom of religion or belief.

15 Frankfurter Allgemeine: “Von Storch offen für Muslime” (7 Oct. 2018), <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/muslime-in-der-afd-beatrix-von-storch-zeigt-sich-offen-15825604.html>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

16 Exzellenzcluster Religion und Politik, Universität Münster: “Religionsfreiheit für alle. Entgegen AfD-Polemiken” (1 Jun. 2016), <https://www.uni-muenster.de/Religion-und->

geois force does not eliminate the radical, but on the contrary aims to normalise it.

With the fight against Islamism, the AfD takes up an objective as a justification for its radical policies, including one-sided restrictions on religious freedom. Combatting Islamism is perceived as important by large parts of the population, and Islamism has been recognised as a real danger by the relevant authorities. What is problematic in this sense is not that the AfD addresses the danger of Islamism, but rather the intention, context and the way they are doing so. Characteristic of the AfD's reference to Islamism are not proposals for the prevention of terrorism that conform to the constitution, but a blanket rhetoric aimed at dissolving the difference between extremist Islamism and the many other forms of Islam in the public perception. For example, representatives of the AfD often selectively refer to passages from the Koran to supposedly prove that "Islam" glorifies violence. Following this pattern, the AfD's spokesperson on domestic policy, Dr Gottfried Curio, questioned the "democratic compatibility of Islam" in the debate on the government statement on the domestic policy course of the federal government on 23rd March 2018, quoted Koranic verses with references to violence and declared Islam and immigration to be the sole cause of a number of murders of women committed by perpetrators with a migration background. He then spoke out against Muslim religious education, claiming with reference to the Koran: "This agitation is now to become a school subject; we are producing ticking time bombs with our eyes open: lessons in contempt for democracy for future perpetrators."¹⁷ Also in 2018, the AfD parliamentary group in the Bundestag submitted a motion entitled "Islam and its inseparable Sharia do not belong to the rule of law," which called for censorship of the Koran in Germany.¹⁸ There is a certain irony in the fact – as rightly noted by the Green Member of Parliament (MP) Omid Nouripour – that the interpretation of Islam limited to glorification of violence, homophobia and misogyny suggested by the AfD corresponds exactly

Politik/aktuelles/2016/jun/PM_Religionsfreiheit_fuer_alle_entgegen_AfD_Polemiken.html, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

17 Plenarprotokoll 19/24 (Minutes of plenary proceedings), p. 2150, <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/19/19024.pdf>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

18 Deutscher Bundestag: AfD-Antrag über Islam und Scharia erntet Widerspruch übriger Fraktionen (11 Oct. 2018), <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2018/kw41-de-scharia-570752>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

to that of the Islamists.¹⁹ Through its discussion impulses, the AfD not only assumes a civilisational backwardness of Islam compared to its own – in its own view – superior culture, which cannot be overcome, but also securitises the issue of combating Islamism in a way that presents almost every conceivable measure as necessary – including strongly discriminatory ones – to preserve the secular order and the culture of the “Christian Occident.”

This approach harms religious freedom in several ways: it perpetuates prejudice and resentment that contributes to discrimination against Muslims, it incites hatred and agitation that leads to violence against Muslims, and it calls into question the universality of human rights by demanding severe restrictions on Muslims that are justified by the defence of Christianity or its values and culture.

The AfD also uses the issue of commitment to Christians in need for its own political goals. For example, in 2018 the AfD submitted a motion to the Bundestag formulating the goal of “stopping and sanctioning the persecution of Christians.” While the goal of helping persecuted Christians is naturally legitimate and worthy of support, the wording of the motion’s justification implies that “Islam” is to be attributed the main responsibility for the persecutions. Among other things, the motion makes the generalised claim that “there is no freedom of religion in Islam according to Western standards.”²⁰

The AfD may well achieve some success with this strategy in the fight for votes and political agenda-setting. However, it avoids dealing with complex contexts and turns legitimate concerns into toxic issues, making constructive and objective debates very difficult.

Staging themselves as the only sincere defenders of religious freedom

The AfD claims to be the only party in Germany that advocates effective protection of religious freedom and persecuted Christians. This became clear – for example – when the AfD Member of the European Parliament (MEP)

19 Konietzny, Benjamin: “AfD interpretiert Islam wie Islamisten” (11 Oct. 2018), <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/AfD-interpretiert-Islam-wie-Islamisten-article20666239.html>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

20 BT-Drucksache 19/1698, p. 4, <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/19/016/1901698.pdf>, accessed on: 6 Sep. 2023.

Joachim Kuhs formulated the following in a statement with proposals for the protection of persecuted Christians, criticising the Christian Democratic Union (*Christlich Demokratische Union*, CDU) and other parties: “Like millions of other AfD voters, it is as clear as day to me that this lasting change for the sake of persecuted Christians and other harassed minorities will not happen with the other parties. Not even with the CDU – as every observant person has been able to recognise for decades.”²¹

In many cases, the AfD also deliberately plays with the knowledge that its motions – as a politically isolated party – cannot expect any approval. For example, the party presents the cross-party rejection of a motion by the AfD parliamentary group for the creation of the position of a Federal Commissioner against Christianophobia as proof that the fate of persecuted Christians is a matter close to the heart of the AfD alone. Other parties are portrayed as inactive or even hostile to Christians.²²

There are also attempts by the AfD to use people involved in the field of religious freedom for their own purposes. For example, in 2020 the AfD parliamentary group in the Bundestag nominated Prof. Dr Christof Sauer, senior consultant of the International Institute for Religious Freedom, and Ado Greve of Open Doors – two experts who are committed to the protection of freedom of religion or belief and of Christians in need – for the board of trustees of the German Institute for Human Rights. However, ultimately the parliamentary group withdrew its nominations after Christof Sauer made it clear that his nomination had been made without informing him. In a letter to the parliamentary group, he described the nomination as an impertinence and called on the AfD to “immediately withdraw the nomination and immediately withdraw the relevant documents from circulation.”²³

21 AfD: Joachim Kuhs: Christenverfolgung – Marktzugänge an Menschenrechte knüpfen! (9 Jun. 2021), <https://www.afd.de/joachim-kuhs-christenverfolgung-marktzugaenge-an-menschenrechte-knuepfen/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

22 AfD: Jürgen Braun: Ampel-Koalition schaut beim Thema Christenverfolgung weg (3 Dec. 2021), <https://afdbundestag.de/juergen-braun-ampel-koalition-schaut-beim-thema-christenverfolgung-weg/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

23 Sauer, Christof: Absage für Nominierung als Kandidat für das Kuratorium des Deutschen Instituts für Menschenrechte (DIMR), 13 Feb. 2020, https://www.bucer.de/fileadmin/dateien/Dokumente/BQs/BQ60off/BQ638/2020-02-13_absage_dimr_nominierung_geschwaerzt.pdf, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

Self-attribution of the victim role

If the AfD and its representatives are criticised for problematic statements and demands, they often demonstrate that they are thin-skinned and even aggressive. Criticism such as the accusation of Islamophobia is rejected as inadmissible.²⁴ At the same time, the party itself anticipates or even provokes such criticism to present itself as the victim of a supposed political correctness.

Frequently, the AfD also attacks the Protestant and Catholic Churches in Germany, which in their view have given in to the *zeitgeist* (the spirit of the times).²⁵ Behind this seems to be a disappointment that the churches in the most important social positions considerably diverge from those of the AfD. With this in mind, in June 2019 the Thuringian state parliamentary group of the AfD – with the support of other prominent representatives of the party – published a paper entitled “Unholy Alliance – The Pact of the Protestant Church with the Zeitgeist and the Powerful,” in which they criticise the Protestant Church in Germany (*Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*, EKD), among other things for its position on refugee aid and its commitment to climate protection, and complain of exclusion on the part of the Church.²⁶

Further examples from German-speaking countries

Similar patterns of attempted appropriation and reinterpretation of religious freedom can also be found in other larger and smaller far-right parties in

24 In its manifesto, the AfD therefore speaks out “against defaming criticism of Islam as ‘Islamophobia’ or ‘racism.’” (Programme of the AfD for the Election to the 20th German Bundestag, p. 84.)

25 Corresponding criticism comes – for example – from the chairperson of the working group “Christians in the AfD” Joachim Kuhs: AfD-Christen-Sprecher Joachim Kuhs: ‘Mehr Geist und Mut für die Kirchen!’ (7 Jun. 2019), <https://www.joachimkuhs.de/christen-in-der-afd-mehr-geist-und-mut-fuer-die-kirchen/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2019. One AfD district association even claims that an AfD election victory is God’s will and that it is not the “official church” and “antiquated clerics” who carry “the word of God to the outside world”: Kirche+Leben: “Polenz entsetzt über ‘Gott will es’-Post der AfD” (26 Apr. 2019), <https://www.kirche-und-leben.de/artikel/polenz-entsetzt-ueber-gott-will-es-post-der-afd/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

26 AfD Heiligenstadt: Unheilige Allianz. Der Pakt der evangelischen Kirche mit dem Zeitgeist und den Mächtigen (Jun. 2019), https://www.afd-heiligenstadt.de/fileadmin/Da-teiablage/PDF/Kirchenpapier_Onlineversion.pdf, accessed on: 6 Sep. 2023.

German-speaking countries. For example, the Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, FPÖ) and the Swiss People's Party (*Schweizerische Volkspartei*, SVP) are the driving forces in their countries of a generalising campaign against Islam and migration, which are presented as alleged threats to Christian culture and the values of the West. For example, in the 2009 European elections, the FPÖ put up posters with the slogan “*Abendland in Christenhand*” (“Occident in Christian hands”), and in Switzerland it is mostly politicians from the SVP and right-wing small parties who initiate legislative and popular initiatives aimed at banning Islam and its symbols from the public sphere. After the ban on minaret building in Switzerland – which was a result of one of these votes – was criticised by the Council of Europe, Franz Obermayr, MEP for the FPÖ, in turn reacted by calling for the abolition of the Council of Europe, portraying the international organisation as a “centre of left-wing political correctness.”²⁷

Similar narratives and resentments as shown by the far-right parties are also cultivated by right-wing movements, organisations and networks, creating an even larger resonance space for corresponding ideas. A prominent example is the anti-Islam movement *Pegida*, whose supporters see themselves as defenders of the “Christian Occident.” Leading politicians are regularly denigrated from the ranks of the movement as “traitors to the people” because they do not share the movement’s anti-Islam and anti-migration positions.²⁸ The *Pegida* support association and several leading figures of the movement were convicted of incitement of the people or insult. In 2017, the Identitarian movement also used the slogan “Religious freedom instead of Islamisation” during a disruptive action at the University of Regensburg to take up a narrative based on a clientelist reinterpretation of religious freedom and construct and overdramatize Islam as an enemy based on conspiracy theory.²⁹

27 APA-OTS: “FPÖ-Obermayr: Europarat als Zentrum der links-linken Political Correctness abschaffen!” (25 Jun. 2010), https://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20100625_OTS0186/fpoe-obermayr-europarat-als-zentrum-der-links-linken-political-correctness-abschaffen, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

28 Die Welt: “Pegida-Demonstranten beschimpfen Merkel als ‘Volksverräter’” (3 Oct. 2016), <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article158512578/Pegida-Demonstranten-beschimpfen-Merkel-als-Volksverraeter.html>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

29 Bayerischer Landtag, Drucksache 17/20749 (printed matter Bavarian state parliament), p. 6, https://www1.bayern.landtag.de/www/ElanTextAblage_WP17/Drucksachen/Schriftliche%20Anfragen/17_0020749.pdf, accessed on: 6 Sep. 2023.

In addition, research by the public broadcaster *Norddeutscher Rundfunk* (NDR) has revealed that representatives of the right-wing, conspiracy theory *Reichsbürger movement*³⁰ have founded alleged Jewish associations. It was possible to prove that in at least one case a corresponding sham religious community was used to apply for public subsidies. One interviewed member of a corresponding association presented himself as a representative of “true Judaism,” while blaming “Zionist Jews” for funding Hitler, thus spreading anti-Semitic theories and at the same time abusing Judaism as a protective shield.³¹

International networking of the stakeholders

Both ideational and operational networking of right-wing actors is not limited to the German-speaking region. For example, in 2019 the AfD founded the so-called Interparliamentary Human Rights Commission (IPMK) in order to – according to its own statement – promote “Christian conservative values” and network internationally for this purpose. To this end, the chair of the body, German parliamentarian Waldemar Herdt, has established contacts with a number of right-wing Evangelicals and government representatives and anti-LGBT activists on at least four different continents.³²

30 The *Reichsbürger movement* is a form of conspiracy-ideological sovereigntism found in Germany. *Reichsbürger* is a collective term for groups and individuals who have in common that they deny the legitimacy and sovereignty of the Federal Republic of Germany and its legal system. In doing so, they invoke the conspiracy theory argument that the German *Reich* continues to exist. Some *Reichsbürger* claim that Germany is still in a state of war and that the Federal Republic (sometimes referred to by them as an alleged company “*BRD GmbH*”) is only a fabricated construct for occupation administration. Following such conspiracy theory ideas, *Reichsbürger* typically reject the legitimacy of the laws of the Federal Republic of Germany and refuse to pay taxes and fees, for example. They often use self-made passports and driving licenses. Anti-Semitic and anti-democratic narratives are widespread in the *Reichsbürger* scene. Esoteric and sect-like, sometimes even openly right-wing extremist attitudes can often be observed.

31 Feldmann, Julian: “Reichsbürger’ gründen ‘Jüdische Gemeinden’” (14 Sep. 2023), <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/panorama/reichsbuerger-juden-juedische-gemeinde-100.html>, accessed on: 28 Sep. 2023.

32 Becker, Andrea/Franzen, Niklas: “Globale Allianzen der neuen Rechten: Predigt von ganz rechts” (20 Aug. 2021), <https://taz.de/Globale-Allianzen-der-neuen-Rechten/!5792401/>, accessed on: 6 Sep. 2023.

Conclusion

Right-wing networks in German-speaking countries refer to topics such as religious freedom, persecution of Christians or supposedly threatened Christian values or culture. They often refer to a kind of cultural Christianity, which is just as connectable in traditionalist and right-wing conservative milieus as it is among identitarians and secularists with an affinity to authoritarian and illiberal thinking. In doing so, they reinterpret religious freedom in a clientelistic way to suit their right-wing ideologies. Islam, migration and a supposed gender ideology are conjured up as images of the enemy. In this way, these movements fuel conspiracy theories on the one hand and tie in with widespread prejudices and fears on the other. The right-wing actors present themselves as the only sincere defenders of religious freedom and the Christian Occident and its values and culture. The corresponding narratives and strands of argumentation are not free of contradictions; for example when they emphasise the threat to homosexuals posed by Islam and migration and promote a “traditional image of the family” and stir up sentiment against a “gender ideology.” By persistently repeating the same messages and narratives, these actors remain at least partly entrenched in a broader public. The situation becomes particularly problematic when religious freedom is subsequently perceived as a “right-wing issue” and ultimately the unprejudiced commitment to this human right is made more difficult.

Escalating the Populist Approach

The Case of Russia and the Significance of History

Regina Elsner

Constructing a useful history is a crucial element of populist approaches to the public discourse. Since the end of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has become a mastermind of history and memory construction in Russia, and at the same time an important actor in international networks of the defense of the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). While the defense of so-called “traditional Christian values” is a strategy of many populists to limit rights of other religious communities or the rights of free speech or artistic freedom, the history of the ROC’s approach to religious freedom deserves special attention. In a rather unique way, the ROC appropriated the memory of repression of Orthodox faithful during the Soviet Union to claim a special right to define where, when and whose religious freedom is under threat. The official justification of Russia’s war against Ukraine by arguments of defending religious freedom symbolizes the peak of populist appropriation and perversion of this human right, and the limits of efficiency of international human rights coalitions.

Constructing a useful history by appropriating repression

Russia and especially the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) have been among the most influential actors in global networks for the protection of the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for a long time. The roots of this engagement trace back to the Cold War, and this history is particularly important to understand the way in which the ROC uses the human rights discourse in the post-Soviet time. Since the 1950s, two developments that might seem paradoxical have taken place. On the one hand, the persecution of religion by the Soviet atheistic government gained new intensity after a short period of concessions during

World War II. On the other hand, after the late-1940s, representatives of the ROC were implemented in all major international institutions concerned with human rights and the human dimension of global politics, such as the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Conference of European Churches (CEC). The simultaneous persecution of faithful and collaboration of church representatives caused a kind of ecclesial schizophrenia, which was difficult to capture by ecclesiological concepts and therefore remained unaddressed in Russian as well as ecumenical discourses.

As part of Josef Stalin's attempt to use the ROC first for war mobilization and later for state propaganda, in 1946 the ROC was allowed to establish a "Department for External Church Relations." This department enabled the church to develop international ecumenical relationships, but it also served the task to support the Soviet foreign agenda. While the faith community in the Soviet Union underwent repression and partly direct persecution, the leadership advocated for religious freedom and against discrimination on international forums. This time of international religious diplomacy had several highly sustainable effects. First, it taught the church the language of human rights, which through the publications in church journals empowered the educated faithful and priests to reflect on their own rights and freedoms, but it also empowered the church diplomats to be a respected part of the international discourse even before conducting a theological discourse of the fundamentals of human rights. Second, the church learned the protocol of international relations. As a result, a rather stable group of diplomats developed within the church, who as so-called travel cadre ("*Reisekader*"¹) maintained a closed discourse about the place of the Soviet Union and the ROC in the international peace movement. As a third result, the participation of church representatives in the exchange between the blocks and the task to adapt theological ideas to the geopolitical discourses about disarmament, deterrence, social justice and coexistence strengthened a consciousness of a dualistic world. This dualistic approach is not alien to the theological perspective on worldly matters; however, with the dualism of systems, the theological approach shifted from eschatological to current sociopolitical aspects. Finally, the ROC and Russia became important allies and over time the leader of the societies and countries with a strong anti-American and

1 Beljakova, Nadezhda/Bremer, Thomas/Kunter, Katharina: "Es gibt keinen Gott!" Kirchen und Kommunismus. Eine Konfliktgeschichte, Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder 2016, p. 128.

anti-Capitalist sentiment. The anti-colonial rhetoric and the demand for social justice – mainly advocated by protestant churches from the Global South – appeared very compatible with Christian principles and easy to comply with in contrast to the anti-Communist currents within the Catholic Church. These alliances proved sustainable beyond the end of the Cold War.

The ROC became a crucial actor in the discourse about religious freedom during the Cold War. For Western churches and other participants of the peace movement during the Cold War, the presence of the ROC was important because everyone was aware of the persecution of religions in the Soviet Union. Giving a leading voice to one of the most persecuted communities of a world religion in the international human rights activities was an important way to highlight the problem at that time. At the same time, especially German ecumenical partners tried to include the ROC in international contexts as a part of coping with their own guilt of World War II. Of course, most partners were aware of the political instrumentalization of the international activities of the ROC, but the aim to build bridges over the Iron Curtain was mostly stronger. The ROC thus received remarkable moral capital in the international context due to the persecution that Christians suffered under the Soviet regime, which at the same time supported the church diplomacy.

The legacy of a repressed and persecuted church remained with the ROC and was effectively used in ecumenical and human rights networks after the end of the Soviet Union. Additionally, since the late-1980s, the revival of religious life strengthened the self-consciousness of the church and the attention of the international community. Relatively quickly, the ROC claimed to be the largest Orthodox church by numbers of faithful, thus demanding a priority role within the Orthodox community. As a result of the Cold War times, the ROC was an established participant in international networks, where other Orthodox churches or other religious communities especially from the socialist block only started to build contacts. On the other hand, the ecumenical and other international partners were grateful for the new freedom of faithful in the region and proud of their important contacts, and they valued the ecumenical openness of the ROC, which was not common for other Orthodox churches.

In 2000, the ROC took two decisive steps nourishing its reputation in these international contexts. The Jubilee Bishops Council approved the “Basis of the

Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church,”² the first socio-ethical document of an Orthodox church in history. The same council approved the collective canonization of more than 1,000 New Martyrs, Orthodox believers who died during the persecution of religion by the Bolsheviks and the Great Terror in the 1920 to 1930s.³ The international ecumenical community paid considerable attention to both decisions. Without exploring these crucial events in greater depth, in the context of the discourse about FoRB two aspects are important. First, the Social Concept dedicates several paragraphs to the question of freedom of conscience in particular and human rights in general, marking them notably as lesser evil because they serve the defense of traditional religions in a secular world. However, they also underline in chapter III.6 “[...] that the spiritual value system has disintegrated and that most people in a society which affirms the freedom of conscience no longer aspire for salvation. If initially the state emerged as an instrument of asserting divine law in society, the freedom of conscience has ultimately turned state in an exclusively temporal institute with no religious commitments. The adoption of the freedom of conscience as legal principle points to the fact that society has lost religious goals and values and become massively apostate and actually indifferent to the task of the Church and to the overcoming of sin.”⁴ In the special document on human rights from 2008, the ROC underlined this understanding of FoRB as a right of religious communities to be protected, rather than a right of individuals to freely choose a religion, or none. FoRB thus has to serve the church to conduct its salvific mission, and remains alien to the perceived core of Russian Orthodox Christianity.

Second, the canonization of the New Martyrs drew attention to the history of repressed and persecuted believers and thus was a strong marker for the commitment of the ROC to FoRB. Without doubt, the losses of live and suffering of believers of the ROC due to their individual religious confession was ex-

2 Bishop’s Council of the Russian Orthodox Church: The Basis of the Social Concept, Moskau 2000, <https://mospatusa.com/files/THE-BASIS-OF-THE-SOCIAL-CONCEPT.pdf>, accessed on: 20 Jul. 2023.

3 Bishop’s Council of the Russian Orthodox Church: Деяние Юбилейного Архиерейского Собора о соборном прославлении Новомучеников и исповедников Российских XX века (Acts of the Jubilee Council of Bishops on the Conciliar Glorification of the New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia of the Twentieth Century), Moskau 2000, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/423849.html>, accessed on: 20 Jul. 2023.

4 For the English version, see: <https://old.mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/iii/>, accessed on: 26 Oct. 2023.

ceptional in numbers and strategy, although other religious communities were also under the threat of extinction. However, the canonization isolated the suffering of the believers from the history of collaboration and guilt within the institutionalized church and thus appropriated the legacy of the suffering for the whole church without addressing the different layers of entanglement of the church itself. For the commitment to FoRB, this means an immunization of the institutional church against the accusation of limiting religious freedom (practically through support of according political programs or theoretically by developing according ideologies). As Oleg Morozov describes, the canonization served to establish the mythology of a victim, which prevented any further process of self-critical approach.⁵ For the international partner, it seems impossible or at least unimaginable that a church could favor limitations of religious freedom having suffered it so much in the nearest past, and honor the memory of the victims of religious persecution in such a way as the canonization of hundreds of martyrs. Who could be a better advocate for FoRB than a church resurrected from devastation?

The post-Soviet leadership of the ROC appropriated the identity of a persecuted church without the authentic experience of persecution. They used it as moral capital within the Russian society, framing critique against the church as new persecution and demanding legal persecution of its critiques to avoid falling back into communist times,⁶ but also in its relations with the West. The authority of this church in alliances for religious freedom largely draws on its claim to “know what persecution really means” and therefore being able to recognize destructive ideologies from afar and being somehow a natural defender of true religious freedom. Thus, the ROC established permanent representations to the European institutions and the UN to defend the rights of re-

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- 5 Morozov, Oleg: “Легенды и мифы российской истории: историческая политика руководства Русской православной церкви в начале XXI в.” (The Legends and Myths of Russian History: the Russian Orthodox Church's Approach to History at the Start of the Twenty-First Century), in: Alexey Malashenko/Sergej Filatov (eds.), *Монтаж и демонтаж секулярного мира (Assembling and Disassembling the Secular World)*, Москва: Российская политическая энциклопедия (Росспен) 2014, pp. 255–322.
- 6 Filatov, Sergej: “Русское православие, общество и власть во времена политической турбулентности. РПЦ после осени 2011 г.” (Russian Orthodoxy, Society, and the Regime During the Times of Political Turbulence. The Russian Orthodox Church After the Autumn of 2011), in: Alexey Malashenko/Sergej Filatov (eds.): *Монтаж и демонтаж секулярного мира (Assembling and Disassembling the Secular World)*, Москва: Российская политическая энциклопедия (Росспен) 2014, pp. 9–41.

ligious communities, and the topic of religious freedom became a cornerstone of its international appearance in ecumenical and interreligious contexts.⁷ Especially in ecumenical dialogues, the end of the obvious Soviet political instrumentalization of the dialogues nurtured the hope for a constructive and experienced Orthodox partner with an ecumenical openness, which many other Orthodox churches lacked.

However, the appreciation of the ROC in ecumenical and human rights networks ignored several important aspects. First, the ROC was no longer representative for the churches in former Soviet countries such as Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia or the Baltic states. Although the Moscow Patriarchate claims the structural jurisdiction over large parts of the former Soviet Union, the people of these new independent countries often developed an independent social consciousness and – seemingly even more importantly – an independent memory culture. Repression and instrumentalization of religion during Soviet times played a visible role in the public discourse as other than Orthodox repressed communities, which came back from the underground and demanded justice. In the international contexts, the religious communities of Ukraine, Belarus or Moldova nevertheless appeared exclusively as part of the Russian Orthodox delegations, without its own voice.

Second, the leadership of the ROC has been complicit with the Soviet leadership in the persecution of religious minorities, most prominently the Greek-Catholic Church in Ukraine and Belarus, as well as Orthodox dissidents, reflecting a historical fact that has never been addressed by the church. This leadership of the church did not change or undergo de-communication after the end of the Soviet Union. The memory of the New Martyrs allowed essentially eliminating the collaboration of church representatives from the official historical narrative and underlining the picture of a persecuted and resurrected church. In addition, religious dissidents in the Soviet Union – if they survived – largely remained repressed dissidents within their church in post-Soviet Russia. None of the officially and individually repressed priests like Gleb Yakunin, Alexandr Ogorodnikov, Georgij Edelshtejn or Alexandr Men – all of whom fought for FoRB with quite severe personal consequences – gained some kind of acknowledgment or promotion. Finally, the appreciation of FoRB by the leadership of the ROC never included a similar engagement for

7 Stoeckl, Kristina/Medvedeva, Kseniya: “Double Bind at the UN: Western actors, Russia, and the traditionalist agenda,” in: *Global Constitutionalism: Human Rights, democracy and the rule of law* 7 (3/2018), pp. 383–421.

the freedom of other religious communities. In the late-1990s, the negative attitude in relation to other religious communities in Russia among Orthodox elites was still very high.⁸ Since then, the Orthodox currents in growing xenophobia and faith-based discrimination within Russian society have been constantly growing, without any intervention by the ROC's leadership.⁹

Looking at this history of appropriation of the experience of repression by the ROC leadership, the problematic conditions of an international actor in the system of advocating and protecting religious freedom who has its own long and publicly negated story of fighting human rights become obvious. The situation of the ROC since 2012 – when the church leadership enforced its collaboration with the autocratic state against a free civil society – is therefore not a new development. Thus, acknowledging this distinct pre-history could be a first step towards understanding the ambiguity of the ROC's participation in international coalitions for FoRB.

Freedom of religion as a weapon

The second dimension of the ROC's instrumental approach to FoRB after the construction of the useful history of faith-based repression during the Soviet Union is the consolidation of a post-Soviet civilizational identity as the last defender of traditional – redemptive – Christianity. During its engagement in overcoming the East-West divide during the Cold War, the ROC positioned Russia and Russian Orthodoxy as an organic part of Europe, namely the Western civilizational sphere. With the end of the Soviet Union and the search for the roots of Russian identity, anti-Western sentiments and an alleged ontological difference to the Western identity were revived, having been part of Orthodox and Russian thinking in the previous centuries. Using different older

8 Furmann, Dmitriij/Kääriäinen, Kimmo: "Люди на тающей льдине (Ценностные ориентации религиозной элиты России)" (People on the Melting Ice Floe. Value Orientations of Russia's Religious Elite), in: *Voprosy Filosofii* (1/1999), pp. 27–33.

9 Verkhovskij, Alexandr/Pain, Emil: Цивилизационный национализм: российская версия «особого пути» (Civilizational nationalism: the Russian Version of the "Special Path"), in: Emil Pain (eds.): *Идеология «особого пути»: истоки, содержание, последствия* (Ideology of the "Special Path": origins, content, consequences), Москва: Три квадрата 2010, pp. 171–210; Sibireva, Olga: "Challenges to Freedom of Conscience in Russia in 2022" (13 Apr. 2023), <https://www.sova-center.ru/en/religion/publications/2023/04/d47036/>, accessed on: 21 Jul. 2023.

concepts of Moscow as the Third Rome, Eurasia, the Holy Rus' or the ancient Katechon, this worldview sees Russia as opposing a collective West, which it describes as secular, liberal, hedonistic, persecuting Christians in the name of minority rights and disseminating destructive ideologies like gender ideology to commit genocide against traditional cultures. This is depicted as an existential threat not only for Russia but also humankind, including paying special attention to the anti-colonial currents in societies of the Global South. Thus, Russia fulfills a messianic role in an apocalyptic battle.

These ideas build on deep anxieties of a society, which for seven decades heard about the will of a fascist West to destroy it. The only power able to stop fascism has been Russia during the Second World War with the help of the ROC. In this construction, Russia and the ROC will be the only credible force able to stop new offenses of fascism or other destructive ideologies like Marxism in the future. Both the ROC leadership and the political elites in post-Soviet Russia invested huge efforts in constructing a paradigm of Russia's victory over evil through the history of World War II as the main identity marker for Russian society in the 21st century. Within this construction, again many questions had no place, such as the issue of guilt, failure, atrocities by the Soviet army, the annihilation of the diverse ethnic, cultural and religious identities within the Soviet Union and the distinct alternative narratives of this historical landmark by the people of the republics, especially in Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltic states. The homogenization of diverse memories and identities provided by the Soviets was continued by the joint memory politics of the political and ecclesiastical elites in 21st-century Russia.

When Patriarch Kirill spoke about the war in Ukraine as a "metaphysical" battle in March 2022, he consequently relied on this prepared narrative of Russia fighting the good battle against evil. Russian civil society has experienced this battle before when the Russian state together with the ROC instrumentalized the human rights discourse to enforce illiberal politics.¹⁰ Individual and civil rights and freedoms have been repressed since 2012, at the latest. These legal repressions have been strategically justified with the "defense of traditional Christian values": spiritual-moral values and a concept of "spiritual security" became part of the National Security Strategy,¹¹ NGOs and religious

10 Stoeckl: Double Bind.

11 Stoeckl, Kristina: "Russia's Spiritual Security Doctrine as a Challenge to European Comprehensive Security Approaches," in: *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 20 (4/2022), pp. 37–44.

organizations like Jehovah's Witness or non-mainstream Muslim communities have been banned as extremists or "foreign agents," domestic violence has been de-criminalized to defend the sacred sphere of the nuclear family, LGBTIQ people have been forced to invisibility, and criticism of the ROC in artistic ways has been framed as "humiliation of religious feelings." At the same time, the so-called "traditional values" have remained extremely fluid and vague.

It was Ukraine's commitment to the European integration since at least 2013/2014 with the Euro-Maidan that posed a particular danger for Russia's salvatory civilizational project. For Russia, Ukraine and Belarus are integral parts of their Russian space, as they are for the ROC as part of the ecclesial jurisdiction and spiritual civilization. However, in Ukraine, independent national policies and social dynamics as well as a rule-of-law approach to the historical religious plurality made it impossible to push the same legal restrictions. The populist attempts of simplification and enemy images could not gain comparable success due to the strong appreciation of cultural and religious diversity after the Soviet Union and the lack of glorification of the past. The narration of "traditional values" could not take ground in a society with diverse traditions. The same counts for an exclusive claim of religious freedom for one Orthodox tradition as there are other Orthodox and several other confessional and religious communities that shape the public discourses.

After 1990, the Ukrainian Orthodox community tried to detach from the Russian influence, although even the global Christian community accepted the claim of the ROC that Ukraine "somehow" belongs to the Russian church. Until now, the majority of observers in the West perceive Orthodoxy in Ukraine as Russian Orthodoxy in Ukraine and therefore support the Russian colonial approach to Ukraine and consequently the accusation of the ROC that Ukraine would oppress parts of the Russian faithful. The reluctance to acknowledge religious autonomy in Ukraine (and Belarus) on the global stage and the tendency to subscribe to the Russian view on Ukraine had a crucial impact on the ability of Russia to develop a narrative about the persecuted Christians in Ukraine.

Since 2018 and the establishment of the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine, the ROC – with the support of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – has engaged in systematic reporting and monitoring of violent and rhetorical attacks on the Ukrainian Orthodox church. They have reported about the "state persecution of Christians" on the international level, namely to the European

Parliament, OSCE and the UN.¹² This argument is an important part of the Russian propaganda about Ukraine as a Nazi regime with satanic and genocidal tactics. At the same time, religious freedom is restricted extensively in all occupied territories, priests and faithful are deported, temples destroyed and sacred places humiliated.¹³

In the first weeks of 2023, the whole dilemma of the role of the ROC in the international defense of FoRB became obvious. After months of hesitating, the Ukrainian government changed its politics in relation to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which has been a major gateway for Russian influence in Ukraine but tried to detach from Moscow since spring 2022. In an attempt to defeat all collaboration and impact from the Russian aggressor within Ukraine, the state enforced pressure on the church, its major monasteries and hierarchs, posing legal investigations and sanctions on them. Empowered by this strategy, large parts of society supported a radical ban of the UOC and cases of violence against buildings and faithful of the UOC emerged. Several draft laws against the church were submitted, most of them in conflict with general principles of FoRB. The international community – both political and ecumenical – had kept silent on these developments for quite a long time, as most of them were sympathetic with the emotional sentiment behind the developments and with a country threatened with elimination. As a tragical result, the ROC – who was a major ideological pillow of the aggression against Ukraine – was the only public voice advocating for the rights of the UOC to religious freedom. After months of ambivalent signals from the ecumenical partners in relation to the warmongering position of the ROC leadership, all attempts to isolate them from international recognition failed at the moment when the international community had to acknowledge the highly questionable course of religious policies of the Ukrainian government. Arguing with the historical memory of

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- 12 Elsner, Regina: 'Verfolgte' Kirche in der Ukraine? Kriegspropaganda, Kirchenkonflikt und globale Konsequenzen, ed. by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (= Monitor Religion und Politik), Berlin 2022, <https://www.kas.de/de/monitor/detail/-/content/verfolgte-kirche-in-der-ukraine>, accessed on: 21 Jul. 2023; Elsner, Regina/Fenno, Iryna: Religionsfreiheit: Ukraine, ed. by Internationales Katholisches Missionswerk missio e.V./Renovabis e.V. (= Länderberichte Religionsfreiheit 59), Aachen 2023, <https://www.missio-hilft.de/missio/informieren/wofuer-wir-uns-einsetzen/religionsfreiheit-menschenrechte/laenderberichte-religionsfreiheit/laenderbericht-059-ukraine.pdf>, accessed on: 23 Dec. 2023.
- 13 Institute for Religious Freedom: Project Locked Faith. The voice of believers during the war in Ukraine (2022), <https://lockedfaith.org/en/c/4>, accessed on: 21 Jul. 2023.

Soviet politics against the Orthodox community and expecting “new martyrs” on Ukrainian soil, the ROC masterfully appropriated the FoRB discourse to gain international recognition despite its justification of months of Russian atrocities.

Culture wars learned and escalated

As a final point, it is worth recalling that Russia and the ROC have not invented new or original ways of misusing the freedom of religion in the ways described by Bernd Hirschberger and Katja Voges in the introduction to this book. As Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner showed for the case of Culture Wars, Russia and the ROC first learned a lot from Western populist allies.¹⁴ However, the major difference compared with the Western ways of populist appropriation is the fact that in Russia it is the institutionalized church, its leadership and official structures who support this appropriation in systematic ways and in close alliance with the state. At present, for Western societies the leadership of churches are an important opposition to populists, even in such countries like Italy or Hungary, and to some extent even in Poland. However, the ROC is no marginal player in both Orthodoxy and Christian ecumenism. It seems that the straight commitment of this official church to a perverted concept of human rights and freedom of religion has been very attractive for Western conservative actors. Prior to the escalation of Russia's war, with the ROC conservative actors in the West received a recognized ecclesial authority that they miss in their own churches.

Russia's war against Ukraine and its outright justification with the alleged defense of traditional values and Christian religious freedom are a radical and horrible escalation of the populist appropriation of FoRB. At present, it is unclear whether this escalation will have some kind of impact on the agenda of other illiberal or populist actors. The ambivalent or hesitant reaction of conservative networks and ecumenical allies like the Vatican or the WCC to the illiberal religious ideology of the war and the situation of religious communities in Ukraine point to a certain deadlock of their engagement for FoRB. They appreciated Russia's straight commitment to religious freedom – perceived as the only conservative human right in contrast (and not in complementarity)

14 Stoeckl, Kristina/Uzlaner, Dmitry: *Moralist International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, New York: Fordham University Press 2022.

to other, liberal individual human rights for too long – and it is still not obvious that they changed their mind in the face of this militant escalation.¹⁵ The short analysis given before suggests that the former uncritical approach to the ROC's history of repression and usage of history is one important key to this deadlock. Take this history seriously and confronting the ROC with these ambiguities at least on the ecumenical level would be a first step for a credible advocacy for FoRB in Ukraine and Russia as well as in those regions like Africa or the Middle East where the ROC also claims a leading role in defending persecuted Christians.

15 Elsner, Regina: "Frieden im ökumenischen Dialog mit der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche," in: *RGOW* 51 (2023), pp. 18–21.

Hungary under Viktor Orbán

“Illiberal Christian Democracy” and the Instrumentalisation of Religious Freedom

Rita Perintfalvi and Katja Voges

Viktor Orbán's government has boasted of its commitment to religious freedom on many occasions. A closer look reveals that this commitment is very limited – namely to helping Christians in need abroad, and that, moreover, restrictions on religious freedom are increasing in Hungary itself. The government deliberately links the issue of religious freedom with its populist politics and rhetoric, thus creating a dangerous reinterpretation of religious freedom in the public perception.

The development of an “Illiberal Christian Democracy”

Since 2010, Hungarian democracy has undergone a fundamental transformation. Most critics of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of the Fidesz party were not surprised when Orbán outlined his vision of building an “illiberal democracy” in Hungary during a speech in Băile Tuşnad (Hungarian: *Tusnádfürdő*), Romania, in July 2014.¹ Part of Orbán's plan for such a democracy is the formalistic reduction of democracy to elections, the centralisation of government power and the criticism of liberal concepts of freedom and rights. The aim is to protect the “cultural order” and thus reject issues such as immigration, feminism and gender in particular. Especially since 2018, Orbán has focused on a Christian concept of illiberal democracy, in which the narrative of Christian victimhood is central, as will be shown later.

1 Tóth, Csaba: “Full text of Viktor Orbán's speech at Băile Tuşnad (Tusnádfürdő) of 26 July 2014” (29 Jul. 2014), <https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-t-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/>, accessed on: 5 Aug. 2023.

Orbán's concept of illiberal democracy is reflected in constitutional amendments and international initiatives and has a direct impact on civil liberties. The Fidesz-KDNP² coalition won the 2010 parliamentary election with a two-thirds majority, creating a constitutional political force. After the election victory, the new coalition used this supermajority to make numerous amendments to the constitution. Subsequently, on 18 April 2011, after a non-transparent preparatory phase, parliament adopted a new constitution called Fundamental Law (*Magyarország Alaptörvénye*).³ Since this Fundamental Law was signed by the President of the Republic, Pál Schmitt, on 25 April 2011, Easter Monday, it has been referred to as the Easter Constitution. The dating takes on a symbolic significance by linking the birth of Hungarian statehood with the resurrection of Jesus.

According to Hungarian political scientist András Bozóki,⁴ the preamble of the Fundamental Law in particular highlights “the political fusion between nationalism and Christianity.”⁵ It states: “We recognise the role of Christianity in the preservation of the nation.”⁶ The Basic Law of 2011 only treats individual rights of freedom as linked to the common good, whereby it does not consider them a value in themselves. The fundamental rights cannot be separated from the basic duties, with the latter being derived from a Christian worldview. The textual formulations place a much stronger emphasis on religion, traditions and “national values” than before. The Fundamental Law is based on the concept of a homogeneous nation. When it refers to equality before the law in Article XV (2), gender, ethnicity and religion are mentioned; however, legal protection has not been extended to sexual minorities.

2 KDNP is the Christian Democratic People's Party, the smaller governing party next to Fidesz in Hungary.

3 Fundamental Law of Hungary, 2011: <https://www.parlament.hu/irom39/02627/02627.pdf>, accessed on: 14 Sep. 2023. For the English translation, see <https://www.parlament.hu/documents/125505/138409/Fundamental+law/73811993-c377-428d-9808-ee03d6fb8178>.

4 Unless otherwise noted, quotes that have not been published in English have been translated into English by the authors of the chapter.

5 Zoltán, Ádám/Bozóki, András: “Vallás és jobboldali populizmus Magyarországon,” in: *Mozgó világ* 44 (3/2018), pp. 17–38, p. 26.

6 Fundamental Law of Hungary, 2011.

In recent years, there have again been numerous amendments to this law,⁷ which the populist government pushed through according to its own power interests and without real consultation with the opposition.⁸ In many respects, there have been steps backwards in the protection of fundamental rights since 2010. In connection with freedom of religion and its instrumentalisation, some peculiarities of the Basic Law and other laws as well as some amendments should be mentioned.

The Hungarian Fundamental Law provides in Article R (4) that "[t]he protection of the constitutional identity and Christian culture of Hungary shall be an obligation of every organ of the state." This is reflected in particular in the constitutionalisation of the traditional concept of family and marriage. Article L (1) of the Fundamental Law defines marriage "as the union of one man and one woman established by voluntary decision, and the family as the basis of the survival of the nation. Family ties shall be based on marriage or the relationship between parents and children." This definition of family was already integrated into the constitutional text by the Fourth Amendment in 2013.⁹ The Ninth Amendment in 2020 added the provision that "[t]he mother shall be a woman, the father shall be a man."¹⁰ The constitutional enshrinement of this form of marriage explicitly excludes same-sex marriages. Unlike other forms of relationships, the classical family model is not only constitutionally protected but must be explicitly favoured by the state.

Furthermore, this amendment of 2020 constitutionally enshrined in Article XVI (1) discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation declaring that it is the duty of the state to "protect the right of children to a self-identity corresponding to their sex at birth, and shall ensure an upbringing for them that is in accordance with the values based on the constitutional identity and Christian culture of our country." Under the guise of protecting the best interests of the child, the constitutional amendment thus formulates a norm that is highly problematic. Completely ignoring current scientific knowledge on transsexuality, the constitution postulates that it wants to protect the self-identity of the

7 Szente, Zoltán: "Constitutional Changes in Populist Times," in: *Revue of Central and East European Law* 47 (2022), pp. 12–36, p. 15.

8 Zoltán: *Constitutional Changes*, p. 16.

9 Bill T/9929. Fourth Amendment of the Fundamental Law of Hungary (8 Feb. 2013).

10 Bill T/13647. Ninth Amendment of the Fundamental Law of Hungary (23 Dec. 2020). The current status of the legislation (12 Sep. 2023): <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?id=ocid=a1100425.atv>.

child, which is considered unchangeably from birth.¹¹ The detailed explanatory memorandum to Article 3 of the amendment warns that “[t]he new, modern ideological processes in the Western world [...] are [...] threatening the wellbeing of children.”¹² It is considered part of human dignity that children have a right to a gender that corresponds to their sex at birth: “Sex at birth is an attribute that cannot be changed: people are born either male or female.” On the proposal of the Minister of Justice, Judit Varga, the parliament presented another amendment to the law, which excluded single persons as well as same-sex couples from the possibility of adopting children.¹³

In addition, in May 2020 the Hungarian National Assembly passed a new law that ended the legal recognition of gender reassignment in official documents. This is achieved by replacing the term “sex” in civil status registers with the term “sex at birth,” which is legally defined by “the primary sexual characteristics” or “biological sex determined by chromosomes.”¹⁴ This change in the law – which was passed by parliament in May 2020 despite a wave of fierce national and international protests – constitutes serious legal discrimination against transgender and intersex persons. Not least, the amendment to the law violated the European standards established by the Council of Europe, which guarantee transsexuals in all EU states the right to have their gender identity recognised in a quickly accessible and transparent procedure.¹⁵

For years, Hungary has been working on a global network on “traditional family values” and organising demographic summits with prominent international speakers, significantly including a Hungarian-Polish signature cam-

11 Szente: Constitutional Changes, pp. 31–32.

12 Bill T/13647, General justification, Art. 3, p. 9–10, <https://www.parlament.hu/irom41/13647/13647.pdf>, accessed on: 30 Sep. 2023.

13 Bill T/13648. Draft law amending certain laws on justice of 10 Nov. 2020, § 99, <https://www.parlament.hu/irom41/13648/13648.pdf>, accessed on: 14 Sep. 2023.

14 Bill T/9934. Changes of Certain Administrative Laws and Free Donation of Property (31 Mar. 2020), § 33 Art. 2 and 3, pp. 9–10, <https://www.parlament.hu/irom41/09934/09934.pdf>, accessed on: 14 Sep. 2023.

15 Council of Europe: Recommendation CM/Rec(2010)5 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity, Art. IV. 21, <http://tinyurl.com/cp32kfa>, accessed on: 14 Sep. 2023; see also United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner: Hungary LGBT: New law proposal endangers rights of the trans and gender diverse persons, warns UN expert (29 Apr. 2020), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2020/04/hungary-lgbt-new-law-proposal-endangers-rights-trans-and-gender-diverse>, accessed on: 18 Oct. 2023.

paing to prevent the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention on the Promotion of the Protection of Women's Rights and Gender Equality, which – according to the Hungarian government-affiliated conservative Centre for Fundamental Rights (*Alapjogokért Központ*) – is designed according to the “principles of gender ideology.”¹⁶

Strengthening “Christian values” and violations of religious freedom

All of these national and international initiatives and encroachments on fundamental rights are linked to the declared aim of strengthening the country's “Christian values” and “Christian identity.” However, shortly after 2010, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in the country was increasingly restricted. Renáta Uitz describes this in particular regarding the changed registration procedures for religious communities through a new law of 2011,¹⁷ which was originally justified with the alleged need to reduce the number of registered churches¹⁸ and strengthen Hungarian traditions. However, “the Hungarian parliament regards the recognition of churches not as a question concerning freedom of religion but as a matter reserved for the discretion of the sovereign.”¹⁹

Thus, until 2011, Hungarian legislation guaranteed church status for religious organisations through a unified judicial registration procedure.²⁰ Based

16 On human rights issues of gender justice within religious communities, including within the Catholic Church, see 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, pp. 38–49, pp. 44–45.

17 Act CCVI of 2011 on the right to freedom of conscience and religion and the legal status of churches, denominations and religious communities, <https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a1100206.tv>, accessed on: 28 Sep. 2023.

18 The term church is used equally in the law for all religious communities, regardless of whether they call themselves a “church.”

19 Uitz, Renáta: “Hungary's New Constitution and Its New Law on Freedom of Religion and Churches: The Return of the Sovereign,” in: *BYU Law Review* (3/2012), pp. 931–965, p. 948.

20 Law IV/1990 on Freedom of Conscience and Religion and on Churches was the basic legislation of the relevant area of law from the period after the regime change (1989). This law addressed the fundamental issues of freedom of conscience and religion based on

on the new Church Act, the recognition of churches was clearly relegated to the competence of the parliament (decision by a two-thirds majority) and it was stipulated that the churches recognised by the parliament will be included in the Annex to the Act. Each of these established churches receives tax and other related benefits as well as budgetary support and is entitled to 1% of the personal income tax paid by individuals on a voluntary basis as well as their state supplement.

Through this new church law, the Fidesz-KDNP government has come to have strong influence over the churches. Since this law determines the church status of a religious organisation by the decision of parliament on a political basis, it can be used as an autocratic instrument of control and punishment. As a result, this law demands uncritical loyalty from church leaders, which thus becomes a survival strategy. Although the new law was qualified as unacceptable by the Hungarian Constitutional Court in 2013 and the European Court of Human Rights found in 2014 that the new church law violates the freedom of religion and the state's duty of neutrality,²¹ many religious communities have not yet regained their lost church status.

As long as this law is in force, it is quite certain that Hungarian churches will be completely dependent on and politically instrumentalised by the Hungarian government, which is trying to set a deterrent example for them by punishing the former church Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship (*Magyarországi Evangélikumi Testvérközösség*, MET) under the leadership of Gábor Iványi since 2011. The church status of this Methodist church was already revoked in 2011, although this religious community had been active in Hungary since 1982 and continuously also carried out educational activities, social and charitable work. The reason for this punishment is that Iványi – formerly a confidant of Orbán – has long been an open critic of the government and the prime minister. He has since become an iconic symbol of the resistance to the government.

the 1989 Constitution by applying a very open model that introduced simple judicial registration of churches instead of licensing, <https://mkogy.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=99000004.TV>, accessed on: 28 Sep. 2023.

21 *Magyar Keresztény Mennonita Egyház and Others v. Hungary* (dec.), nos. 70945/11 and 8 others, 8 Sep. 2014, §102, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-142196%22%5D%7D>], accessed on: 25 Oct. 2023.

The narrative of the Christian victim role and the threat to "Christian culture"

Viktor Orbán sees a competition of cultures emerging, in which Christianity is in danger of falling victim to the "Islamic threat." He sees himself as the saviour of the Christian West, in the tradition of the Calvinist concept of divine election.²² On the Hungarian Conservative portal, Orbán is praised for this attitude and portrayed as a protector of Christianity: "Those wishing to see a fully secularised European Union and who seek to ultimately undermine religion cannot help but tremble now that Hungarians overwhelmingly gave Viktor Orbán a mandate to safeguard and promote Christian democracy."²³ The fact that Orbán not only presents himself as the defender of Christianity but furthermore has a clearly patronage-based understanding of religious freedom becomes evident on numerous occasions. Some articles reporting on the years-long conflict between Viktor Orbán and Pastor Gábor Iványi referred to above quote a speech in which Orbán expresses that "the essence of illiberal democracy is Christian liberty and the protection of Christian liberty."²⁴

In his 2017 Christmas address, Orbán reduced Christianity to its cultural significance and described Christian culture as a prerequisite for the "correct" understanding of human rights:

"Our culture is the culture of life. Our starting-point – the alpha and omega of our philosophy of life – is the value of life, the dignity that every person has received from God. Without this we could not evaluate 'human rights' and similar modern conceptions. This is why we doubt whether we can export this into the life of civilisations built on other foundations."²⁵

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- 22 Prömpers, Klaus: "Viktor Orbán. Retter des christlichen Abendlandes?" (20 Jun. 2016), <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/viktor-orban-retter-des-christlichen-abendlandes-100.html>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.
 - 23 Portella, Mario Alexis: "Orbán's Challenge to Uphold Christian Democracy" (10 May 2022), <https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/politics/orbans-challenge-to-uphold-christian-democracy/>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.
 - 24 Silliman, Daniel: "Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship Raided amid Ongoing Conflict with Viktor Orbán" (25 Feb. 2022), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/february/hungarian-evangelical-fellowship-raid-conflict-orban-nation.html>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.
 - 25 Here translated by a traditionalistic-conservative website: Orbán, Viktor: "We Europeans Are Christians": Christmas Address" (29 Dec. 2017), <https://theimaginativecon>

At the same time, Orbán opposes the alleged renaming of Christmas markets and outlines a threat scenario:

“Today the attack is targeting the foundations of our life and our world. Europe’s immune system is being deliberately weakened. They do not want us to be who we are. They want us to become something which we do not want to be. They want us to mix together with peoples from another world and, so that the process will be smooth, they want us to change. By the light of Christmas candles we can clearly see that when they attack Christian culture they are also attempting to eliminate Europe.”

Anti-Muslim and anti-migrant positions

Part of Viktor Orbán’s populist rhetoric and his appropriation and reinterpretation of the issue of religious freedom is an anti-Muslim and anti-migrant political agenda. For example, in 2016, he postulated in an interview with the *Passauer Neue Presse*: “The civilisation that arose from Christianity and the civilisation that arose from Islam do not go together. They cannot mix, they can only coexist.”²⁶

In one of his Friday morning interviews on Kossuth Radio in March 2019, he underlined that his priorities are Christian culture and migration. “We won’t compromise on the issue of the protection of Christian culture and migration. Everything else is open for discussion.”²⁷ Here, again, the Hungarian prime minister reduces Christianity to a kind of Christian culture, thus revealing that he is more concerned with the alleged protection of a cultural identity than with matters of faith. Indeed, Ádám Zoltán and András Bozóki speak of a “strikingly nationalistically coloured substitute for religion,”²⁸ which is

servative.org/2017/12/europeans-christians-christmas-address-viktor-orban.html, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

- 26 Miniszterelnöki Kabinetiroda (Prime Minister’s Office): “Interview der deutschen Passauer Neuen Presse mit Viktor Orbán” (20 Oct. 2016), <https://miniszterelnok.hu/interview-der-deutschen-passauer-neuen-presse-mit-viktor-orban/>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.
- 27 Kovács, Zoltán: “PM Orbán: We won’t compromise on migration and the protection of Christian culture” (8 Mar. 2019), <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/pm-orban-we-won-t-compromise-on-migration-and-the-protection-of-christian-culture>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.
- 28 Zoltán: *Vallás és jobboldali populizmus*, p. 33.

an ideological principle that gives the nation as a collective identity a quasi-religious status to which the individual subordinates himself.²⁹

Significantly, the Hungarian government was even criticised by the United States' administration under President Donald Trump for its rhetoric. In its International Religious Freedom Reports during the Trump presidency, the U.S. State Department noted that the Hungarian government regularly resorted to anti-Muslim and anti-migrant rhetoric and – in some cases – anti-Semitic patterns of communication. A report from 2021 states:

“Senior government officials, including Prime Minister (PM) Viktor Orbán, continued to make statements in defence of what they called a ‘Christian Europe’ and against Muslim immigration. In September, Orbán said present-day migrants were ‘all Muslims’ who changed the cultural identity of Europe. Other politicians made anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim statements.”³⁰

In 2017, in the first session of parliament, Viktor Orbán warned against a *Soros Plan*,³¹ “an action plan that describes exactly how disobedient, non-immigrant Central European countries should be transformed into immigrant countries,” which is why it is worth giving “more power and authority than ever to those who are prepared to defend the future of Christian Hungary,” against which he sees a “new global offensive by one of the main religions, Islam.”³²

Budapest Report on Christian Persecution

In 2016, as part of its self-declared development of a Christian democracy, the Hungarian government established the State Secretariat for Aid to Persecuted

29 Zoltán: Vallás és jobboldali populizmus, p. 39.

30 U.S. State Department: Hungary 2021 International Religious Freedom Report, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/HUNGARY-2021-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

31 Schlagwein, Felix: “Wie George Soros zum Feindbild wurde” (27 May 2020), <https://www.dw.com/de/wie-george-soros-zum-feindbild-wurde/a-53572731>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023; see also Kalmar, Ivan: „Islamophobia and anti-antisemitism: the case of Hungary and the ‘Soros plot’,” in: *Patterns of Prejudice* 54 (1–2/2020), pp. 182–198.

32 Visegrád Post: “Viktor Orbán: Christianity and identity versus western liberalism” (20 Sep. 2017), <https://visegradpost.com/en/2017/09/20/viktor-orban-christianity-and-identity-versus-western-liberalism/>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

Christians and, in 2017, it launched the Hungary Helps programme, a state-run, non-profit agency that aims to support Christians worldwide in their countries of origin and thus stands in opposition to Western and – from Hungary’s perspective – pro-migration policies.

Since then, the State Secretariat for Aid to Persecuted Christians and Hungary Helps have regularly commissioned the publication of religious freedom reports, the Budapest Reports on Christian Persecution. In all reports – including the fifth one of 2021 – the described appropriations and reinterpretations of the topic of religious freedom are particularly evident in the preface written by Viktor Orbán.³³ Orbán links and mixes the legitimate demand for a commitment to persecuted Christians worldwide with typically populist motives. The European and Western mainstream – which plays the role of the “elite” in Orbán’s narrative – is sharply attacked. By idly standing by, they are complicit in the fate of persecuted Christians. Orbán speaks of an anti-Christian attitude of new political movements whose “goal is to eradicate all of those characteristics that have emerged from Christian culture: the nation, the family based on the marriage of a man and a woman [...]”. At the same time, he speaks of “sexual propaganda” promoted by NGOs. In the preface to the fourth report of 2020, Orbán is even more explicit in some places.³⁴ He explains that talking about violence against Christians has even become a “taboo.” The liberal “anti-Christian forces” of the mainstream would push the “rainbow ideology” and specifically attack politicians and church people who reject this ideology. On the other hand, Hungary is presented as a saviour who “first had to break through the walls of hypocrisy and the hypocrisy that hides behind the guise of political correctness.” As it has done for centuries, Hungary exercises the role of the “shield of Christianity” in Europe. In doing so, Orbán outlines the threat scenarios of 1.5 billion refugees in Europe and an end to “Christian civilisation and values” in the event that the elites continue to “bury their heads in the sand.”³⁵

33 Ujházi, Lóránd/Boér Zoltán/Kaló, József/Petruska, Ferenc (eds.): Budapest Report on Christian Persecution 2021, <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/19SQCd5tqcrnAcpPAU-giNDceYfQvZEO5>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

34 Ujházi, Lóránd (ed.): Budapest Report on Christian Persecution 2020, <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/10Ehuj4b461cv56G9iG7W2fsmkoXoY3ap>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

35 Hirschberger, Bernd/Voges, Katja: “Vereinnahmt und verzerrt. Wie der Rechtspopulismus die Religionsfreiheit instrumentalisiert,” in: *Forum Weltkirche* (6/2021), pp. 19–22.

International networking and strategies

Hungary embeds its policy of illiberal Christian democracy in a large-scale international networking strategy. The State Secretariat for Aid to Persecuted Christians is not a mere international aid programme but an instrument for political networking. Thus, numerous large-scale international conferences have already taken place. In 2019, the prime minister welcomed 650 religious leaders and experts from 40 countries.³⁶

Within the framework of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), the Hungarian government establishes contacts not least with the evangelical right in the USA. This annual conference gathers international religious rights and has had a foreign policy networking function in recent years. In May 2022, this conference was held in Europe for the first time, in Budapest. Viktor Orbán gave the keynote speech and defended his populist nationalism. He referred to his opponents as "progressives, Marxists" and as "the international liberal left."³⁷ This rhetoric is common during meetings, with the main enemy images being liberal democracy, feminism, queer people and refugees, who are seen as a threat to Christian civilisation. Anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic conspiracy theories are commonplace. In 2023, the conference was held in Budapest for a second time.

The issue of outreach to Christians also provides a perfect networking opportunity between Hungary and Orthodoxy, including Russia. When Viktor Orbán opposed EU sanctions against Patriarch Cyril, he invoked religious freedom, which supposedly does not allow sanctioning church leaders.³⁸ Various church leaders, including Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of Antioch and the Whole East, the head of the Syrian Orthodox Church, expressed gratitude

36 Rome Reports: "Hungary seeks allies against Christian persecution with political and religious leaders" (26 Nov. 2019), <https://www.romereports.com/en/2019/11/26/hungary-seeks-allies-against-christian-persecution-with-political-and-religious-leaders/>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

37 Cullen, Ross: "Hungary a 'fortress of conservative and Christian values' says Orban" (20 May 2022), <https://newseu.cgtn.com/news/2022-05-20/Hungary-a-fortress-of-conservative-and-Christian-values-says-Orban-1abYjtDWG3u/index.html>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

38 Tidey, Alice: "Orban criticises EU plans to sanction head of Russian Orthodox Church" (5 Jun. 2022), <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/05/06/orban-criticises-eu-plans-to-sanction-head-of-russian-orthodox-church>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

for Orbán's commitment against the sanctions.³⁹ For his part, Patriarch Cyril praised Orbán several times for his fight for "Christian values."⁴⁰

It is also necessary to critically examine the political staging around the Hungary Helps programme. During presentations of the programme, the Hungarian State Secretary for Aid to Persecuted Christians, Christian Asbej, often demonstratively anticipates common criticisms of the programme – such as its one-sided focus on Christians – with an accusatory undertone. For example, he emphasises that the initiative is necessary because Christians are the most persecuted religious group worldwide, but also because Hungary is a "proud Christian nation" and wants to strengthen its Christian identity. In interviews, the question is often asked whether Hungary's commitment would make the country popular in other European countries. The state secretary's answer often mixes populist rhetoric with the topic of religion and religious freedom: "We have been told: It is against political correctness to support Christians [...] In fact it is against political correctness to be Christian."⁴¹ What also becomes evident on many occasions is the connection between the claimed central role in the defence of Christianity with the fight against LGBTIQ rights, whereby the political agenda is linked to the commitment to Christians. Critics of Hungary Helps claim that the commitment is pure politics and ask – for example – why the Hungarian government does not actively support religious freedom for Christians in Turkey, Russia and China as part of their program.⁴²

39 Daily News Hungary: "Orban meets Syriac Orthodox Patriarch" (12 May 2022), <https://dailynewshungary.com/orban-meets-syriac-orthodox-patriarch/>, accessed on: 28 Sep. 2023.

40 Hungary Today: "Russian Patriarch Kirill Congratulates PM Orbán" (17 May 2023), <http://hungarytoday.hu/patriarch-kirill-congratulates-orban/>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

41 Wishon, Jennifer: "Hungary Defends Biblical Principles and Helps the Persecuted: 'Hungary is a Christian Nation'" (27 Sep. 2021), <https://www.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2021/august/hungary-defends-biblical-principles-and-helps-the-persecuted-hungary-is-a-christian-nation>, accessed on: 28 Sep. 2023.

42 Hungarian spectrum. Reflections on politics, economics, and culture: "International Conference on Christian persecution in Budapest" (29 Nov. 2019), <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2019/11/29/international-conference-on-christian-persecution-in-budapest/>, accessed on: 26 Aug. 2023.

Final remarks

The examples given in this article show that, while the Orbán government seems to fully support the cause of religious freedom, the reality behind the strategically well-constructed scenes of political deception is different. The right-wing populist government politically instrumentalised the Christian churches and Christianity itself to such an extent that it did not promote religious freedom, but on the contrary restricted their freedom and turned Christianity into a political weapon. The tragic consequences of this became clear to the church leadership only recently when the data of the 2022 census came to light. In a country with a current population of 9.6 million, the Roman Catholic Church has lost 1.1 million believers within eleven years since 2011 and has thus halved in the last 20 years. According to the Central Statistical Office, in 2001 there were still 5.3 million believers in the Hungarian Roman Catholic Church, of whom only 3.7 million remained in 2011 and only 2.6 million in 2022.⁴³ Although all churches used a very intensive campaign to persuade their followers to make a clear statement in the census, 40% of the population refused to answer the question of which church they felt they belonged to. There are obviously complex reasons behind this, but one of them might be that many church leaders showed no resistance and allowed the government to deprive them of their sovereignty.

43 Központi Statisztikai Hivatal (Central Statistical Office): Népszámlálás 2022 (Population Census), <https://nepszamlalas2022.ksh.hu/eredmenyek/vegleges-adatok/kiadvany/assets/nepszamlalas2022-vegleges-adatok.pdf>, accessed on: 28 Sep. 2023.

Religious Freedom for Christian Majorities

The Brazilian Case

Leandro L. B. Fontana

The book “Brazil: Land of the Future” by the famous Austrian writer and pacifist Stefan Zweig went down in history as a declaration of love to Brazil and its people. Among the things that fascinated him most in this land were Brazilians’ tolerance, open-mindedness, and in particular their ability to live courteously and peacefully in the midst of a high degree of cultural, ethnic, and geographic diversity.¹ Far from being merely a foreign, romanticized view of Brazil, this stereotype has also been cherished and nurtured for decades by the Brazilian people. This is partly due to the fact that this narrative was constructed in the process of formation of the Brazilian national identity that took place in the first half of the twentieth century and gradually found its way into the Brazilian DNA.²

Against this backdrop, the significant increase in cases of religious harassment in Brazil over the last decade has not only shocked the public but also posed several challenges to analysts from various disciplines. In fact, various sources point to an increase in the number of cases by about 315% from 2015 to 2021. How to make sense of this unprecedented magnitude of violence, intolerance, and stigmatization? What could be the causes, who are the main actors involved, and for what reasons? This paper aims to explore these questions, with particular emphasis on mapping ethnographic-hermeneutic attempts to both describe and analyze this phenomenon. For this purpose, it begins by examining the empirical evidence for the rise in cases of religious intolerance.

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- 1 Zweig, Stefan: *Brasilien. Ein Land der Zukunft*, Stockholm: Bermann-Fischer 1941, pp. 153–158.
 - 2 Souza, Jessé: *A ralé brasileira. Quem é e como vive*, Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG 2009, pp. 29–39.

It then looks for basic patterns in the reported cases to outline a profile of intolerance, as it were. The next section occupies center stage inasmuch as it focuses the research interest on performances of intolerance and non-cognitive factors rather than hermeneutic efforts to scrutinize the content and images circulated by the main actors or assess the cogency of their arguments. This methodological choice is crucial to the analytical reflection that follows, given that this final part delves into the scripts of these performances and offers a brief account of the current Brazilian scholarly debate on this phenomenon.

The empirical evidence for religious intolerance

Overall, issues related to religious intolerance or freedom of religion or belief were not part of the public debate in Brazil until recently. A turning point was marked in 2015, when these issues also began to appear on the public agenda.³ The case of the eleven-year-old girl Kaylane Campos in that year epitomized the kind of religious intolerance taking place in Brazil in several respects and had significant national repercussions. After being hit on the head with a stone as she left her *Candomblé terreiro*⁴, the perpetrators continued to insult Kaylane, using abusive language and saying she should now burn in hell on account of her religion.⁵ This regrettable incident prompted not only a new public debate but also initiatives such as the “Reports of Religious Intolerance in Brazil” – *inter alia* – whose data are indeed impressive. For instance, whereas fifteen cases of religious intolerance were registered in 2011, four years later in 2015 this figure had increased to 223.⁶ Even more alarming was the 2023 report,

3 Nogueira, Sidnei: *Intolerância Religiosa*, São Paulo: Jandaíra 2020, p. 70.

4 *Terreiros* are temples or houses run by a male or female Candomblé priest where practitioners can gather, hold their ceremonies and worship, offer their sacrifices, and receive counselling. In the absence of a corresponding word/translation in English, this term will be used throughout.

5 For more details, see Santos, Carlos Alberto Ivanir dos/Gino, Mariana: “A menina e a pedra. Uma breve delimitação sobre a intolerância religiosa no Brasil,” in: Ivanir dos Santos/Maria das Graças Nascimento/Juliana B. Calvacanti M. T./Mariana Gino/Vítor Almeida (eds.), *Intolerância religiosa no Brasil. Relatório e balanço*, Rio de Janeiro: CEAP 2016, pp. 58–68, p. 58f.

6 Santos, Ivanir dos/Nascimento, Maria das Graças/Calvacanti M. T., Juliana B./Gino, Mariana/Almeida, Vítor (eds.): *Intolerância religiosa no Brasil. Relatório e balanço*, Rio de Janeiro: CEAP 2016, p. 23.

which compiled data from 2019 to 2021 and showed an increase to 966 registered cases of religious intolerance in 2021 alone.⁷

Based on these reports, it does not appear to be a coincidence that in the case of Kaylane Campos the victim was a member of Candomblé – an Afro-Brazilian religion – and the perpetrators – in addition to being Christians – acted out of religious convictions and/or motivations. In fact, out of 966 reported acts of religious intolerance in 2021, 244 (25% of the total) were inflicted on members of Afro-Brazilian religions. This is followed by 186 acts of intolerance suffered by Evangelicals (19%) and 125 by Catholics (13%). Taken by themselves, these numbers may not seem that impressive. However, when contrasted with the broader picture of the country's religious landscape, the proportions acquire entirely new dimensions. The proportions should then be interpreted in the following terms: 244 cases were reported among 590,000 practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions (0.3% of the total Brazilian population), 186 cases among 43 million Evangelicals (22.2%) and 125 cases among 124 million Catholics (64.6%).⁸ It is therefore fair to say that proportionally, the members of the majority religion in Brazil – namely Christianity – have not experienced as much religious harassment as members of religious minorities.⁹ With this being the case, another question that emerges is why among all of the religious minorities in Brazil such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Candomblé, Umbanda, etc. – all making up less than 1% of the population – the largest number of attacks were concentrated in the Afro-Brazilian communities alone. This question will be the focus of the following section, since

7 Santos, Carlos Alberto Ivanir dos/Dias, Bruno Bonsanto/Santos, Luan Costa Ivanir dos: *II Relatório sobre Intolerância religiosa. Brasil, América Latina e Caribe*, Rio de Janeiro: CEAP 2023, p. 35.

8 The numbers relative to the Brazilian population were taken from the last officially published census of 2010 (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística – IBGE: *Censo Demográfico 2010. Características gerais da população, religião e pessoas com deficiência*, Rio de Janeiro: IBGE 2012, pp. 143–144), as are other statistics used in this text, unless indicated otherwise. Although a new national census was conducted in 2022, at the time of writing of this paper the results were not yet made public.

9 Dias, Bruno Bonsanto/Santos, Luan Costa Ivanir dos: “II Relatório sobre Intolerância Religiosa. Brasil, América Latina e Caribe, Reflexões teóricas e a necessidade da construção de bases de dados e de estatísticas públicas sólidas,” in: Carlos Alberto Ivanir dos Santos/Bruno Bonsanto Dias/Luan Costa Ivanir dos Santos: *II Relatório sobre Intolerância Religiosa. Brasil, América Latina e Caribe*, Rio de Janeiro: CEAP 2023, pp. 167–181, p. 180.

– apart from the Jewish community, which is currently also alarmed by an unprecedented increase in the number of neo-Nazi groups throughout Brazil¹⁰ – there is no evidence that any other minority religion is as threatened as Afro-Brazilians.

The forms of intolerance described in the reports ranged from insult, humiliation, threats, and coercion to the destruction of places of worship, vandalization of offerings, displacement from territory, and abuse of power by state authorities, to crimes of bodily injury.¹¹ As for the aggressors, according to the reports, the majority belong to Evangelical denominations, although the number of Catholics is also significant. This corroborates the argument put forward by several analysts who have established a correlation between the recent increase in cases of religious intolerance and the emergence of Evangelicals and Pentecostals as increasingly influential actors on the public and political scene.¹²

The performance of intolerance

The stigmatization of Afro-Brazilian religions as well as ethnicity has a long tradition in Brazil's history. Obviously, the Catholic Church has her share of guilt in this bitter chapter, as does the Brazilian state, even after the colonial period, from the nineteenth century onwards. However, while the state introduced the principle of religious freedom into its legislation and the Catholic

10 For more details, see Grattan, Steven: "Neo-Nazi Groups Multiply in a More Conservative Brazil" (14 Jun. 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/neo-nazi-groups-multiply-more-conservative-brazil-2023-06-13/>, accessed on: 08 Jul. 2023; Santos: *Il Relatório*, p. 104–105.

11 Santos: *Il Relatório*, p. 69.

12 See e.g., Silva, Vagner Gonçalves da: "Neopentecostalismo e religiões afro-brasileiras. Significados do ataque aos símbolos da herança religiosa africana no Brasil contemporâneo," in: *MANA* 13 (2007), pp. 207–236, <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-93132007000100008>; Miranda, Ana Paula Mendes de: "'Terreiro Politics.' Against Religious Racism and 'Christofascist' Politics," in: *Vibrant Virtual Brazil Anthropology* 17 (2020), pp. 3–20, <https://doi.org/10.1590/1809-43412020v17d456>; Cunha, Magali do Nascimento: *Do púlpito às mídias sociais. Evangélicos na política e ativismo digital*, Curitiba: Appris Editora 2019, pp. 32–36; Dias, João Ferreira: "'Chuta que é macumba.' O percurso histórico-legal da perseguição às religiões afro-brasileiras," in: *Sankofa* 12 (2019), pp. 39–62, <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.1983-6023.sank.2019.158257>; Nogueira, Sidnei: *Intolerância*.

Church in the second half of the twentieth century – imbued with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council – made significant efforts to promote ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, another kind of intolerance began to be rehearsed in some Pentecostal churches. In fact, there is a broad consensus among experts in attributing to Bishop Edir Macedo – the founder of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God – a key role in the waging of a “holy war”¹³ against Afro-Brazilian religions.¹⁴ This war was also taken up by a few other neo-Pentecostal churches that were emerging in the 1980s. “In our church” – writes Macedo in a polemic book published in the 1980s,¹⁵ explicitly attacking Afro-Brazilian religions – “[...] demons are humiliated and even mocked.”¹⁶ In fact, in their sessions of exorcisms, performances are extremely humiliating, and all demons that are driven out are attributed to the works (*trabalhos*) of Afro-Brazilian sorcerers, who are also mocked. For “[...] umbanda, quimbanda, candomblé, and spiritist religions and practices are, in general, for demons, the main channels of action.”¹⁷

These performances of humiliation, contempt, and even disgust not only took place in worship services, but they were also daily broadcast on television. “Many of these TV shows present ‘reconstructions of real cases’ or dramatizations in which symbols and elements of Afro-Brazilian religions are construed as spiritual means with the sole purpose of causing harm: the death of enemies, the spread of diseases, the separation of couples or love relationships, discord in the family, etc.”¹⁸ Whether in the form of testimonies by former Candomblé priests or quarrels with demons being driven out from attendants of the services, Afro-Brazilian religions had been constantly depicted as satanic and extremely harmful for one’s personal and social life. Moreover, as the media power of these churches has expanded (TV broadcasters, newspapers, in-

13 Mariano, Ricardo: *Neopentecostais. Sociologia do novo pentecostalismo no Brasil*, São Paulo: Loyola 2014, p. 111.

14 For more details, see Mariano: *Neopentecostais*, p. 119; Oro, Ari Pedro: “Neopentecostais e afro-brasileiros. Quem vencerá esta guerra?” in: *Debates do NER 1* (1997), p. 10–36, p. 13, <https://doi.org/10.22456/1982-8136.2686>; Silva: *Neopentecostalismo*, p. 212; Dias: *Chuta que é macumba*, p. 48.

15 Unless otherwise noted, quotes that have not been published in English have been translated into English by the author of the chapter.

16 Macedo, Edir: *Orixás, Caboclos e Guias. Deuses ou Demônios?*, Rio de Janeiro: Universal Produções 1987, p. 134.

17 Macedo: *Orixás*, p. 113.

18 Silva: *Neopentecostalismo*, p. 217.

ternet platforms, social media, mobile apps, etc.), so has the reach of this narrative.¹⁹

However, it is more important – considering the purpose of the present paper – to bear in mind that this theology has exerted a profound impact on concrete lives, material objects, and geographical spaces. For example, the fact that members of these churches go to *terreiros* to destroy altars, break images, and exorcise their members should come as no surprise in light of the above.²⁰ In the same vein, scholars have identified another layer to this problem, which is a much more complex phenomenon arising on the fringes of large urban centers such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Belo Horizonte, among others. It concerns the entanglement of drug traffickers, criminal organizations, politicians, and Evangelical-Pentecostal churches in an explicit offensive against Afro-Brazilian communities.²¹ Once Catholics and/or adherents of Candomblé, these populations have increasingly become Evangelical or Pentecostal, as has the territorial space. Former traffickers – now converted to Evangelicalism or associated with a church/pastor – have launched a “witch hunt” against Afro-Brazilian practitioners and their places of worship to “clear the land,” eliminate *terreiros* and other authority figures, and impose “a belief that convinces, regulates and produces obedience.”²² Experts emphasize that it is not merely about religious expansion and missionary efforts to win over new souls, but instead, “the phenomenon has favored the consolidation of an agenda of customs and increased attacks on gender, religious and racial minorities in the country.”²³ Furthermore, the performative character of this

19 For more details see Cunha, Magali do Nascimento: *Fundamentalisms, the Crisis of Democracy and the Threat to Human Rights in South America. Trends and Challenges for Action*, San Salvador: Koinonia 2020.

20 Silva: *Neopentecostalismo*, p. 217.

21 Miranda: *Terreiro Politics*, pp. 3–20; Vital da Cunha, Christina: “‘Traficantes evangélicos’: Novas formas de experimentação do sagrado em favelas cariocas,” in: *Plural 15* (2008), pp. 13–46, <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2176-8099.pcco.2008.75226>; Pereira, Réia Sílvia/Mesquita, Wania Amélia Belchior: “Entre setas e demônios. Pentecostalidade performática guerreira em um território de favela,” in: *Ciencias Sociales y Religión 24* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.20396/csr.v24i00.8671021>.

22 Miranda, Ana Paula Mendes de/Muniz, Jacqueline de Oliveira/Almeida, Rosiane Rodrigues de/Cafezeiro, Fausto: “‘Terreiros’ Under Attack? Criminal Governance in the Name of God and Armed Dominion Disputes Over Control in Rio de Janeiro,” in: *Dilemmas, Special Edition 4* (2022), pp. 651–682, pp. 654–659, <https://doi.org/10.4322/dilemmas.v15esp4.52535>.

23 Miranda: *Terreiros*, p. 671.

phenomenon is not without bearing on the impact of these actions. “The theatricalized performance of the attacks/assaults [...] allows for the production of a subservient local public and audiences threatened remotely through smart phone screens.”²⁴ As with the aforementioned televised exorcism sessions in which the humiliation and triumph over demons are performed on a daily basis, communication media also plays a central role in these milieus, thereby proving to be a key component in the design of this religio-political project.

Another factor that has enormously contributed to the escalation of this conflict was the rise of Evangelicals to public and political influence.²⁵ In addition to their ability to channel their social capital into political influence, these actors owe much of their success to their capacity to construct simple narratives and use rhetorical devices with great impact. In this regard, again performance and staging have held fundamental importance.²⁶ In Brazil, one of the most effective narratives deployed by Evangelicals/Pentecostals in the public/political sphere has been the idea – or rather sentiment – of Christophobia. On the one hand, this device implies that Christians are being persecuted worldwide, against which they are to speak up, and on the other hand that Christians are also under threat in Brazil.²⁷ While identifying at once the persecutors and the cause of the major crisis that Brazil is going through – namely the minorities – due to their moral/spiritual decay, this device proposes as a solution the bending of the minorities to the values of the majority – namely Christians – by means of a single public morality/religiosity.

24 Miranda: Terreiros, p. 663.

25 For more details see Pérez Guadalupe, José Luis/Carranza, Brenda (eds.): *Novo ativismo político no Brasil. Os evangélicos do século XXI*, Rio de Janeiro: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung 2020.

26 See also Adelakun, Abimbola Adunni: *Performing Power in Nigeria. Identity, Politics, and Pentecostalism*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press 2021.

27 For an account on this concept, see Carranza, Brenda: “Die neue christliche Rechte. Politische Subjektivität, Gender-Ideologie und Christophobie,” in: Leandro L. B. Fontana/Markus Lubert (eds.), *Politischer Pentekostalismus. Transformation des globalen Christentums im Spiegel theologischer Motive und pluraler Normativität*, Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet 2023, pp. 66–94; see also former President Bolsonaro’s speech at the 2020 UN General Assembly: *Nações Unidas: “Em discurso na ONU, Jair Bolsonaro pede combate à ‘cristofobia’”* (20 Sep 2020), <https://news.un.org/pt/story/2020/09/1727002>, accessed on: 10 Aug. 2022.

It should be noted that these narratives are not only deployed in these actors' "propaganda feedback loops"²⁸ but also in the Brazilian National Congress, among other spaces, in alliance with other conservative Christian groups. PL 1804/2015 and PL 4152/2019 can be cited as examples of bills that explicitly deploy the Cristophobia argument to justify the tightening of the current legislation on crimes of mockery (against Christians), increasing both the term of imprisonment and the bail. By way of illustration, the justification for PL 1804/2015 reads as follows: "[...] for what has happened in recent years in demonstrations, mainly in LGBT events, is what we could call 'Christophobia', and involves the practice of obscene and degrading acts that express prejudice against Catholics and Evangelicals."²⁹ For these crimes, PL 4152 provides for a prison sentence of up to nine years.³⁰ Meanwhile, there are 72 bills under consideration that seek to regulate the principle of freedom of religion in one way or another.³¹ These range from excluding religious ministers from the crime of insult and defamation in the exercise of their ministry (PL 6314/2005) to exemptions from taxes on property, income, and religious services (PLP 21/2020), and the prohibition of state intervention in pastoral and priestly activities (PL 2756/2011). Afro-Brazilian religions would be particularly affected by bills PL 8062/2017 and PL 4331/2012, which propose prohibiting the sacrifice and/or use of animals in religious rituals. Thus, under the aegis of the principle of *laïcité*, Evangelicals and some Catholic groups are seeking to reshape the country's legislation to further expand the rights of Christians, while circumscribing those of other (minority) religions and/or groups.³²

28 Benkler, Yochai/Faris, Robert/Roberts, Hal: *Network Propaganda. Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, New York: Oxford University Press 2018, p. 57.

29 Câmara dos Deputados: Projeto de Lei No. 1804, de 2015, p. 2, https://www.camara.leg.br/proposicoesWeb/prop_mostrarintegra;jsessionid=node01lz81dnrhkncipu3j9ui7zbhz13374989.node0?codteor=2161028&filename=Avulso+-PL+1804/2015, accessed on: 20 Jun. 2022.

30 Câmara dos Deputados: Projeto de Lei No. 4152, de 2019, p. 1, https://www.camara.leg.br/proposicoesWeb/prop_mostrarintegra?codteor=1781213&filename=Tramitacao-PL+4152/2019, accessed on: 20 Jun. 2022.

31 Weber, Bruno Curtis: "Em nome do Laico, do Cisma, da Liberdade Religiosa, amém," in: *Plural* 28, pp. 184–208, <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2176-8099.pcs0.2021.179714>.

32 Weber: *Liberdade Religiosa*, p. 202–204.

The architecture of intolerance

Having considered some of the most prominent manifestations of religious intolerance, the question remains how to make sense of this recent phenomenon that is gradually gaining ground in Brazil. The first observation in this regard concerns the very term “religious intolerance.” Far from simply mirroring – in the public debate – forms of religious polarization or conflicts involving differing worldviews, this category has taken on a very specific connotation in Brazil. It “[...] has circumscribed the experiences of victimization by religious prejudice and expresses, in our times, the growth of conflicts between Afro-Brazilian groups and those of an Evangelical-Pentecostal religious profile.”³³ In light of this, some scholars as well as Afro-Brazilian activists have come up with the term “religious racism” instead, arguing that it better captures and conceptualizes this notion.³⁴ In their view, what is ultimately at stake is a religiopolitical project of hegemonic power that includes – among other things – an “epistemicide,” that is the erasure of a people’s knowledge, practices, beliefs, memories, and origins³⁵ and a “religious genocide against black people.”³⁶ Albeit acknowledging that this may appear to be an excessive assessment, at first glance one of the reasons that nevertheless renders these claims tenable is the fact that other religious or ethnic collectives have been far less affected than these. It should therefore be noted that the category of “religious intolerance” today refers less to general forms of intolerance than to this specific, targeted variant.

In the same vein, some scholars have been working with the concept of “Christofascism.”³⁷ Coined by the German theologian Dorothee Sölle in the 1970s in a completely different context, this concept has been reinterpreted in Brazil, especially in view of the rise of the so-called Christian Right to key positions of power and influence, of which former President Bolsonaro’s administration represented a high point. As with the term “religious racism,”

33 Miranda: *Terreiros*, p. 652.

34 For more details, see Nogueira: *Intolerância Religiosa*; Fernandes, Nathalia Vince: *Engalha: “A discriminação contra religiões afro-brasileiras. Um debate entre intolerância e racismo religioso no Estado brasileiro.”* in: *Revista Calundu* 5 (2/2021); Miranda: *Terreiro Politics*, pp. 3–20.

35 Nogueira: *Intolerância Religiosa*, p. 122.

36 Miranda: *Terreiro Politics*, p. 12.

37 For more details, see Py, Fábio: *Pandemia Cristofascista*, São Paulo: Recriar 2020; Miranda: *Terreiro Politics*.

the analytical potential of this concept resides in its ability to decode and expose the very architecture of this kind of intolerance. Fábio Py defines it as the interweaving of Christian language and symbolism with a Manichean worldview to underpin and legitimize an authoritarian power project for the country along the lines of a “Christian Nation.”³⁸ If this analysis proceeds, one can indeed recognize – as claimed by the above-cited authors – an overlap between the new performances of religious intolerance and the new project that has been advanced by the New (Christian) Right for the Brazilian nation.

While acknowledging that this concept is often employed with a lack of conceptual precision and empirical evidence, bringing up the notion of the New Right – closely related to, and sometimes overlapping with, the Christian Right – seems helpful at this point in at least two respects: it sheds some light on the actors involved in this project, and it exposes the tenets at its core. As for the former, Benjamin Cowan’s studies have shown that this movement was capable of bringing together very “strange bedfellows” who were not historically closely related. It comprises “[...] Brazilians, North Americans, Catholics, Protestants, secular conservatives, neo-medieval fantasists, authoritarian opportunists, and others.”³⁹ In his assessment, the core values that appeal to these different groups are “veneration for private property, hierarchy, nationalism, and traditional culture; and rejection of ethnic and religious pluralism, global liberal humanitarianism and cooperation, modernism [...], secularization, and ‘communism.’”⁴⁰ Bearing this in mind, one may better grasp why the Christophobia narrative works so well in the Brazilian context. As it appears, it essentially accomplishes two things. For one thing, Evangelicals – who actually are a “minority” – bracket themselves together with Catholics, thereby placing themselves on the side of the “majority,” as well as appealing to the sympathy and engagement of Catholics.⁴¹ For another thing, these actors invert the roles

38 Py: *Pandemia*, p. 29–30; see also Borda, Guillermo Flores: “A construção de uma ‘Nação Cristã’ na América Latina,” in: José Luis Pérez Guadalupe/Brenda Carranza (eds.), *Novo ativismo político no Brasil: Os evangélicos do século XXI*, Rio de Janeiro: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung 2020, pp. 131–151.

39 Cowan, Benjamin A.: *Moral Majorities Across the Americas. Brazil, the United States, and the Creation of the Religious Right*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2021, p. 2.

40 Cowan: *Moral Majorities*, p. 15.

41 For more details, see Burity, Joanildo A.: “Minoritization and Pluralization. What Is the ‘People’ That Pentecostal Politicization Is Building?,” in: *Latin American Perspectives* 43 (2016), pp. 116–132, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X16639238>.

of victims and persecutors, create a common enemy – namely the minorities – and spread a sense of moral panic in the ubiquitous public sphere.

Final remarks

This contribution has attempted to provide a brief account of the significant changes observed in Brazil in recent years regarding religious (in)tolerance. Throughout, the religiopolitical orientation of the performances of intolerance stands out as the most salient feature of this recent phenomenon. Nonetheless, despite this fundamental political component, the concept of populism alone has not proved adequate to capture and account for this multifaceted phenomenon, for which other concepts have been tentatively explored. Rather than a political strategy or a general attitude of intolerance towards other religions, Brazilian scholars essentially concur that at the heart of this phenomenon is a very specific, contingent form of religious intolerance, which might as well be conceived of in terms of “religious racism.” For its part, this concept exposes the idiosyncratic sources of this development: the alliance of a fundamentalist, agonistic variant of Christianity with authoritarian economic elites who – under the flag of conservatism and with recourse to populist rhetoric – are advancing a nationalist project for Brazil.

It has been emphasized that this heterogeneous group of Christians comprises Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Mainline Protestants, and Catholics alike, with none of them representing the full spectrum of their respective denominations. However, their narratives and performance-oriented use of communication media have catapulted them into prominent positions on the public and political scene. Far from seeking to downplay or de-value the important contributions of these actors to society, this paper has attempted to lay bare the contingent (rather than necessary, normative, teleological) character of this variant of Christianity,⁴² thereby suggesting the need for both more (theological) debate and finding forms of balancing the presence of different political, social and religious actors on the public scene. Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Catholics have also certainly been – and remain – victims of religious intolerance. However, the prerogative of interpretation of the

42 See e.g., Burity, Joanildo: “El pueblo evangélico. Construcción hegemónica, disputas minoritarias y reacción conservadora,” in: *Encartes 3* (2021), pp. 1–35, p. 6, <https://doi.org/10.29340/en.v3n6.158>.

right to freedom of religion or belief should not be hijacked by any majority religion, let alone by a minority group such as the Christian Right, as in the case of Brazil.

Abuse of Religious Freedom?

Ethical Preliminary Remarks on “Religion-Based” Resistance against COVID-19 Protective Measures

Andreas Lob-Hüdepohl

Introduction: Religion-based rejection of COVID-19 protection measures

On Sunday, 31 January 2021, a few hundred people marched through the centre of Vienna to take a visible public stand against the protective measures imposed by the Austrian government in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. They passed off their Sunday inner-city procession as a “Christian procession” to escape the bans on political demonstrations previously prescribed by the courts and police under the protection of the free exercise of religion. In the days before, about a dozen gatherings had been registered for Austria’s capital but had not been approved by the responsible authorities, with reference to the relevant protection measures against COVID-19, prohibiting any larger gatherings for the purpose of interrupting chains of infection. As a result, many of the initiatives affected by the assembly ban called upon people in the relevant social media to take part in this same Sunday “Christian procession.” For its part, the Catholic Church in Vienna immediately warned against the demonstration, which was merely declared as a Christian procession and thus superficially disguised. The spokesperson of the Archdiocese of Vienna spoke of a “clear abuse of religion and religious freedom.”¹

As early as 2012, the so-called Celtic Druidic Faith Community (*Keltisch-Druidische Glaubensgemeinschaft*) was founded in Germany. It sees itself as an anti-vaccination religion: as the self-description accessible online states, “the Celtic Druidic Faith Community was brought into being to protect us from

1 Kleine Zeitung (31 Jan. 2021).

some state obligations.”² The “faith community” makes no secret of the fact that the invocation of religious freedom is of a purely instrumental-strategic nature: there are no priests, rituals, prayers or prohibitions in the Celtic Druidic Faith Community. According to their opinion, people do not really need any religious or church affiliation at all and they think that the leaders of the established churches bully their believers and suppress their personal development simply to “secure a good income.” Nevertheless, nationally and internationally, “freedom of religion and church law are held in high esteem in conjunction with constitutionally guaranteed freedoms. We must use these advantages for the members of our community by demanding and claiming these guaranteed rights for ourselves.” In this way, it is possible to effectively protect self-responsible lifestyles from the encroachments of the state: “Our faith and our dignity protect us from state encroachments on our private autonomy. As a faith community, we resist, for example, compulsory vaccination as in Switzerland, which was introduced via an Epidemic Diseases Act. In Germany, we are taking ways to escape the increasing paternalism by ‘authorities’ and thus the violation of our dignity, our private autonomy and our principles of faith.”

Right at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Catholic community Institute of St. Philip Neri in Berlin filed a lawsuit against the complete ban on church services, which was also imposed by the state of Berlin at the time. While the two large Christian churches – the Archdiocese of Berlin and the Evangelical Church of Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia (EKBO) – expressly welcomed the ban on even the Holy and Easter liturgies and declared it binding for all of their congregations,³ some free-church or diocesan-independent Catholic communities resisted these orders and took legal action against the general decrees or state ordinances on which the bans were based, citing the freedom of religion, which is particularly protected under constitutional law and precisely comprises the public and communal practice of religious beliefs. Above all, the congregation leader and provost told the press that

2 Keltisch-Druidische Glaubensgemeinschaft: Über uns, <https://keltisch-druidisch.de/keltisch-druidisch/grundsaeetze/uber-uns>, accessed on: 23 Jan. 2023.

3 For an overview of the reactions of the two major churches in Germany, see Mückl, Stefan: “Die Katholische Kirche in Deutschland in der Corona-Pandemie,” in: Stefan Mückl (ed.), *Religionsfreiheit in Seuchezeiten*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 2021, pp. 135–162; Frisch, Michael: “Das bisherige normative Handeln der evangelischen Landeskirchen in Deutschland aufgrund der Corona-Pandemie,” in: Mückl (ed.), *Religionsfreiheit in Seuchezeiten*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 2021, pp. 163–186.

they are opposed to unjustified unequal treatment that reveals a lack of knowledge or even appreciation of communal worship. Provost Gerald Gösche stated: "I don't begrudge everyone to work in their free time, but it's not vital when DIY stores open. I think it is wrong for the state to consider only material things as necessary. In church services we praise God which strengthens and comforts the faithful. Especially in times of crisis, this gives support. Some people are really disturbed that this is no longer possible."⁴

Three examples from German-speaking countries with comparable state or constitutional structures shed light on the very heterogeneous picture of religion-based rejection of the respective state's COVID-19 protection policy. Here, "religion-based" stands for a broad range of ways in which institutions and associations justify their sometimes vehement, sometimes even militant rejection, with reference to their (alleged) religious potential. For example, the Celtic Druidic Faith Community finds its home in the German *Reichsbürger movement*⁵ against the globally prevailing protection policies against COVID-19. Further facets of this picture could be added from the international scene. Particularly striking are state actors who – with reference to their religious convictions – oppose the widely recognised COVID-19 protection measures, such as those repeatedly called for by the World Health Organisation. Moreover, they prevent their implementation in their own areas of responsibility, such as the (now former) Presidents of Brazil (Bolsonaro) and the U.S. (Trump) or the strictly Catholic President of Tanzania, John Magufuli, who was in power at the beginning of the pandemic. The latter explicitly demanded and promoted to keep churches and mosques open, since it was precisely praying and celebrating communities that promised true healing, stating: "COVID is the devil, and it cannot survive in the body and church of Christ."⁶

4 Weiss, Julia: "Gemeinde klagte gegen Gottesdienstverbot. 'Uns wurde das Coronavirus an den Hals gewünscht'" (16 Apr. 2020), <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/uns-wurde-das-coronavirus-an-den-hals-gewunscht-4695676.html>, accessed on: 23 Jan. 2023.

5 See chapter "Populist Reinterpretation and Appropriation of Religious Freedom Worldwide," footnote 30.

6 Jacobs, Andreas: "Corona-Test für Religionspolitik. Das Verhältnis von Staaten und Religionsgemeinschaften zu Beginn der COVID-19-Pandemie," in: Jeannine Kunert (ed.), *Religion und Corona. Religiöse Praxis in Zeiten der Pandemie (EZW-Texte 268)*, pp. 35–49, p. 42.

Admittedly, not all opposition to the prevailing protection measures against the COVID-19 pandemic that is in any way identified as religion-based is automatically an abuse of religious freedom. What is obvious for the disguised protests against COVID-19 restrictions in Vienna and elsewhere⁷ or the Celtic Druidic Faith Community does not automatically apply to the efforts of individual communities such as the Institute of St. Philip Neri, who – with reference to religious freedom – are defending themselves in court against certain protective measures against COVID-19. One may judge such efforts as lacking solidarity or their religious convictions as being theologically untenable. A judicial review of considerable restrictions of a fundamental right – and the prohibition of a service on the highest holiday of a religious community undoubtedly represents such a restriction – is a legal and legitimate exercise of constitutional rights, which is also open to people who consider themselves to be at home in strictly conservative and – for many – largely inaccessible thinking environments. Indeed, even the former president of Tanzania, who according to some sources might have died of COVID-19, will not be directly accused of an abuse of his religious freedom, in the knowledge of his deep Catholic religiosity, unless – as the highest representative and regent of his state – he in fact denied his population essential protective measures in gross negligence, and took them hostage for his religious convictions.

When looking back at the course of the COVID-19 pandemic (so far), one may observe that the *religion-based* resistance to governmental protective measures against the coronavirus has remained within a manageable framework, at least in the overall picture. After all, religious communities around the world have not only accepted the respective protective measures and the sometimes extremely sensitive losses of religious practice associated with them, but have even explicitly justified them for religious reasons; for example with reference to the religiously commanded duty of solidarity and love of one's neighbour. Nevertheless, it is instructive and significant to address this phenomenon of religion-based rejection. However, it occurs, abuse of religious freedom in the

7 There were similar attempts in Germany, such as in Nuremberg on 16 January 2021 (Der Spiegel: "Kirche warnt vor falschem Gottesdienst durch Corona-Leugnerinnen und -Leugner" [16 Jan. 2021], <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/nuernberg-kirche-warnt-vor-falschem-gottesdienst-durch-corona-leugner-a-2ca14d04-09cb-414d-a215-foe296376a89>, accessed on: 23 Jan. 2023) or Munich on 2 November 2020 (Kirche+Leben: "Anti-Corona-Demo in München als ‚Gottesdienst‘ – Kirchen protestieren," [2 Nov. 2020], <https://www.kirche-und-leben.de/artikel/anti-corona-demo-in-muenchen-als-gottesdienst-kirchen-protestieren>, accessed on: 23 Jan. 2023).

context of protective measures against the coronavirus can not only severely endanger entire populations but can also backfire on the meaning and value of religious freedom itself. In a public increasingly critical of religion, the abuse of religious freedom can discredit it at the same time.

Abusive vs. erroneous references to religious freedom: The legal framework

The Celtic Druidic Faith Community is bluntly making public what many other opponents of protective measures against the coronavirus are probably counting on, namely the special protection that they hope to receive from invoking religious freedom, and if not legal protection, necessarily, then the protection of public opinion. Legally, the courts dealing with this request have largely rejected this instrument, as the abusive appeal of such movements coming from coronavirus deniers, *Querdenker*⁸ or right-wing populist circles was too obvious. On the other hand, they could benefit politically – at least upon first glance – from the fact that with the invocation of religious freedom a moment of “higher” absoluteness flashes up, which can at least count on a certain understanding among the general public.

8 *Querdenker* („lateral thinkers“) are a protest movement against coronavirus protection measures in the German-speaking world. The roots of the movement are heterogeneous. While in south-western Germany the movement was initially mainly driven by anthroposophical, alternative and esoteric milieus, right-wing extremists played a central role in eastern Germany from the outset. A pronounced skepticism towards vaccinations is widespread in the scene; in line with a distorted concept of freedom, coronavirus protection measures are perceived as oppressive. Protesting is perceived as an act of resistance against alleged deception and oppression. There is a strong mistrust of political institutions and traditional media; in the course of increasing radicalization, these institutions have even been stylized as the enemy. Conspiracy theories, such as that influential businessmen are having the population forcibly vaccinated, are popular in the scene. There is also a particular susceptibility to anti-Semitic and anti-democratic narratives; in some cases, there is also great sympathy of *Querdenker* protesters for the US conspiracy ideology *QAnon*. Central figures in the movement avoided a clear demarcation to the far right, which in turn was used by radical actors such as the right-wing extremist AfD to present themselves as representatives of the protesters' interests to promote themselves to gain support from within the movement.

In fact, freedom of religion already has a very high status under the constitution. Article 4 of the German Basic Law is unambiguous: “Freedom of faith and of conscience and freedom to profess a religious or philosophical creed shall be inviolable” (Art. 4 para. 1 GG). Moreover, “the undisturbed practice of religion shall be guaranteed” (Art. 4 para. 2 GG). Unlike other fundamental rights (Art. 2 (2) GG: Right to freedom of the person; Art. 5 (2) GG: freedom of expression, freedom of the press), the practice of religion is not even subject to a direct legal restriction clause. Attempts in the Parliamentary Council to add the words “within the framework of the general laws” to the granting of religious freedom and at least address the exercise of religious freedom in the public sphere failed.⁹ The (public) practice of religion can only be subject to restrictions if it conflicts with other fundamental rights, such as the fundamental right to life and physical integrity (Article 2 (2) of the Basic Law). Freedom of religious and ideological confession – like freedom of faith and conscience – even has a special proximity to the core of human dignity: according to the former President of the German Federal Constitutional Court and Federal President Roman Herzog, “if it applies to any fundamental right article, Article 4 is a direct outflow of the principle of human dignity declared inviolable in Article 1 I and thus at the same time one of the ‘inalienable and inviolable human rights’ addressed by Article 1 II.”¹⁰

Even without this direct reference to the core of human dignity, freedom of religion – in its unity with freedom of thought and conscience – has a high status in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), in terms of both its internal conviction (*forum internum*) and its public and communal exercise (*forum externum*). Consequently, this International Covenant also subjects any restrictions on these rights to a similarly high barrier as the German Basic Law: “Freedom to manifest one’s religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others” (Art. 18 (3) ICCPR).

The protective measures against the coronavirus that have been imposed in many parts of the world on a legal basis and led to considerable restrictions on

9 Hillgruber, Christian: “‘Ungestörte’ Religionsausübung in der Pandemie?,” in: Stefan Mückl (ed.), *Religionsfreiheit in Seuchzeiten*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 2021, pp. 113–132, p. 116f.

10 Herzog, Roman, in: Maunz/Dürig, *Grundgesetz Kommentar* Loseblatt, Stand 92. Lfg. August 2020, Art. 4 Rn.11.

freedom (including freedom of religion) over a long period must also be judged against this normative background. In Germany, the protective measures include (or included) a wide range of instruments: in addition to basic protective measures such as basic hygiene rules, room ventilation, distance requirements or the obligation to wear a medical mouth and nose protection mask or the quarantines and domestic isolation of infected persons and proven close contacts, it was above all the sometimes comprehensive restrictions on movement and contact that massively impaired the public and private co-existence of people and in turn caused considerable social, health, cultural or even economic damage.¹¹ All measures served to stop chains of infection and thus prevent an unacceptable number of severe and fatal courses of disease, as well as protecting the intensive care health system from collapse.

As the pandemic progressed, further protective measures became possible and were also taken, which allowed movement and contact restrictions in particular to be eased: a far-reaching testing strategy as well as the start of the vaccination campaign in spring 2021 and associated "2G" or "3G" rules¹² made it possible for part of the population to enter spaces of communal life (restaurants, cultural institutions, visits to inpatient facilities for particularly vulnerable groups, travel, etc.). While in principle the COVID-19 protection measures were met with widespread acceptance in large parts of the population, the basic protection measures and later especially the vaccination campaign mobilised an initially still heterogeneous group of so-called "*Querdenker*,"

11 See the statement of the German Ethics Council on the presentation and effects on individuals and society in detail: "Vulnerabilität und Resilienz in Krise – Ethische Kriterien für Entscheidungen in einer Pandemie," Berlin: Deutscher Ethikrat 2022, p. 94. The restrictions on religious freedom are only mentioned in two sentences: "The public practice of religion was also severely restricted. In many cases, digital event formats were offered as a substitute." (Translated into English by the editors of this book.) A particular concern of the 24-member panel, which in addition to two constitutional lawyers also includes six theologians of different denominations and religions, is definitely not discernible from this rather casual remark.

12 During the pandemic, at times rules were in place in Germany that tied access to some places or activities to certain requirements. "3G" stands for the three German terms "*geimpft*," "*genesen*" and "*getestet*." The access requirement under the 3G rule was therefore either to be vaccinated against COVID-19, to have recovered from the virus or to have tested negative for the virus. "2G" stands for the German terms "*geimpft*" and "*genesen*." Accordingly, the entry requirement under the 2G rule was to be vaccinated or recovered.

“Corona deniers,” “*Reichsbürger* movement” or “vaccination opponents” to oppose the protection measures against the coronavirus. They were very quickly joined by the usual right-wing populist or extremist groups and parties, as they sensed considerable potential support for their own political agenda.

With the vaccination campaign, a new facet of religion-based rejection of protective measures against the coronavirus emerged. Up to this point, restrictions on movement and contact led to bans on liturgical services with physical presence of the faithful¹³ or the limitation of worship celebrations such as baptisms, first communions or even funerals. They thus considerably restricted the public and communal practice of religion. The situation is different now with compulsory vaccination, although the introduction of a statutory obligation to vaccinate *everyone* ultimately failed in Germany in the spring of 2022.¹⁴ However, prior to this the German parliament had passed an institution-related vaccination obligation for members of such professions who inevitably come into contact or have to come into contact with particularly vulnerable persons (groups). Moreover, quite a few people felt pressured to be vaccinated at least because a sufficient vaccination status was a prerequisite for admission to public events in the course of the so-called “2-G” or “3-G” rules. However, what happens if one refuses any form of vaccination for religious or ideological reasons and thus this form of highly personal private religious practice inevitably radiates into the public sphere, precisely because vaccination refusers must expect consequences (non-admission to professional practice or to community events, etc.)? Would this not constitute discrimination on religious or ideological grounds? If so, shouldn't this virtually act as an invitation to everyone to take refuge under the (supposedly) safe roof of this very specific exercise of religious freedom with their opposition to vaccination or their rejection of COVID-19 protection measures in general?

Of course, even in this constellation, religious freedom offers only limited protection to escape protective measures against the coronavirus. The refusal

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- 13 Online liturgies are of course ordinary liturgies, even if they are not atmospherically comfortable (for understandable reasons!). The best-known (short) liturgical act is the papal blessing *urbi et orbi*, the liberating effect of which (indulgence of even serious transgressions) is even granted to TV viewers without any loss.
- 14 Only those who cannot be vaccinated for medical reasons should be excluded. These medical reasons should also include those that trigger traumatic fear reactions to new vaccinations as a result of previous vaccination damage or complications.

of medical measures on religious grounds is accepted, even if they are medically indicated to save life. The example of Jehovah's Witnesses who refuse any blood transfusion – even in a life-threatening condition – is appropriate. However, the acceptance of their religiously based refusal finds its legitimate limit exactly where their religious conviction endangers others. Thus, parents are threatened with the loss of custody of their children whenever they withhold medically imperative measures from their children out of religious or ideological conviction. The same applies to vaccination refusers, whose (religiously based) decision is to be respected. Nevertheless, there is a considerable qualitative difference between the *obligation* to vaccinate (possibly with sanctions) and *compulsory* vaccination.¹⁵ However, the persons concerned are not fundamentally protected from the possible consequences of such a decision, at least not if it involves serious risks and harm to others. It is true that such consequences must be limited to what is absolutely necessary and never sanction the religious or ideological conviction as such. However, if certain consequences are suitable and necessary to protect the fundamental rights of others, any unavoidable disadvantages are legitimate.

Moreover, the mere invocation of a decision based on conscience or religion is insufficient. Decisions of conscience – like beliefs – must also undergo elementary tests of plausibility and truthfulness. In principle, if one claims a moral dilemma, "one must be able to demonstrate the seriousness of one's moral dilemma in a comprehensible way."¹⁶ The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) argued similarly when it affirmed this in principle in a landmark decision on the legality of religion-based rejection of vaccination obligations, but made it dependent on a sufficient degree of validity, seriousness, coherence and significance.¹⁷

Motives for the abusive reference to religious freedom

Even if it should emerge that the quantitative extent of the abusive reference to religious freedom as a defence against COVID-19 protection measures is na-

15 Deutscher Ethikrat: Impfen als Pflicht?, Berlin: Deutscher Ethikrat 2019.

16 Rixen, Stephan: "Die Gewissensfreiheit der Gesundheitsberufe aus verfassungsrechtlicher Sicht," in: Franz-Josef Bormann/Verena Wetzstein (eds.), *Gewissen. Dimensionen eines Grundbegriffs medizinischer Ethik*, Berlin: De Gruyter 2014, pp. 65–88, p. 73.

17 *Vavřička and Others v. the Czech Republic* [GC], nos. 47621/13, ECHR 8 Apr. 2021.

tionally and internationally kept within reasonable limits after a concomitant analysis of the empirical findings,¹⁸ it should not be neglected as it is a qualitatively relevant problem.

On the one hand, in the very obvious cases of abusive reference to religious freedom, such as in the case of the Celtic Druidic Faith Community or demonstrating anti-vaccination activists and “*Querdenker*,” the question emerges concerning why these movements do not simply refer to the freedom of conscience or ideology – which holds equal importance under constitutional and human rights law – but instead explicitly seek the protection of religious freedom. In any case, an original religious interest that would make this immediately plausible is not recognisable. It is possible that these groups and movements hope for more acceptance in state and society by referring to religious freedom. In fact, with the reference to freedom of conscience, one is *alone* in case of doubt, and with the reference to a worldview, one always remains bound to *life in this world*. By contrast, the reference to an authority in the *hereafter* – which is associated with a religion – promises a special aura of the unconditional and immovable. To see oneself (ostensibly) compelled by one’s own conscience to defend oneself against COVID-19 protection measures always remains somewhat weaker – at least in terms of external effect – than seeing oneself (ostensibly) compelled by a higher and otherworldly authority, which one believes one can only oppose by sacrificing the salvation of one’s soul.

On the other hand, another motive may be responsible for the abuse of religious freedom. Indeed, it is striking that especially right-wing populist groups and movements use their opposition to the COVID-19 protection measures to give new impetus to their anti-etatist agenda against the “political elites” in governments, parliaments, business, science, culture or even in churches. For this purpose, they need new allies or at least supporters who are sympathetic to their cause. Right-wing conservative circles – especially in the Christian churches – offer themselves directly for this purpose. There have been “cultural bridges” to these milieus for a long time, with which right-wing populist agendas are intended to and can be made compatible.¹⁹ Occasionally,

18 There is currently no relevant empirical social science survey on this. The present preliminary considerations also draw their empirical basis more from “anecdotal” evidence, which is mainly fed by everyday observations.

19 I cannot discuss these questions in more detail here. See also Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.): *Dem Populismus widerstehen. Arbeitshilfe zum kirchlichen Umgang mit rechtspopulistischen Tendenzen* (= Arbeitshilfe Nr. 305), Bonn 2019; Lob-Hüdepohl, Andreas: “Kirche gegen Rechtspopulismus – auch in den eigenen Rei-

even right-wing populist actors such as a board member of the association "Christians in the AfD" and member of the European Parliament explicitly call on churches to value and support their commitment to religious freedom.²⁰

It is certainly no coincidence that even leading right-wing Catholic circles around the former officials Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano and Curia Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller follow the right-wing populist narrative that the protective measures against the coronavirus – including against the practice of religion – actually only served those in power as a tried-and-tested means of pushing the religious life of the Christian churches in particular out of the public eye. Even if church members are not receptive to such conspiracy-theoretical suggestions, they may start to wonder when even in actually scientifically high-quality statements there are still fragments of beliefs that call for special caution regarding COVID-19 protection measures, although this direction has long since been overcome both theologically and church-officially: constitutional lawyer Christian Hillgruber states that "according to the teachings of the Catholic Church, the Holy Mass is about making present the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, through which the individual believer receives a share in the redemptive graces acquired through Christ's death on the cross. The so-called personal fruit of the Mass is only given to the priest who celebrates and to the faithful who are physically present."²¹ Shouldn't we do everything in our power to avert the impending loss of salvation for Catholics at the last minute?

"Abusive" is to be carefully distinguished from "erroneous." If believers refer to a (supposed) requirement of their religious tradition and therefore defend themselves (in court) against protective measures against the coronavirus, they may falsely invoke the absolute nature of their religious freedom. This will have to be decided by the court and does not yet constitute an abuse of their religious freedom. However, this is definitely the case when political movements and groups merely make use of the protection and social prestige of religious freedom as a helpful instrument to better stage their actual political agenda, and

hen," in: Bernd Emunds (ed.), *Christliche Sozialethik – Orientierung welcher Praxis?*, Baden-Baden: Nomos 2018, pp. 239–259.

20 Kuhs, Joachim: *Offener Brief: Gottesdienste für alle – ohne Corona-Beschränkungen* (2 Dec. 2021), <https://www.joachimkuhs.de/offener-brief-gottesdienste-fuer-alle-ohne-beschaenkungen/>, accessed on: 6 Feb. 2023; Kuhs, Joachim: *Massenexodus: Rekord bei Austritten aus katholischer Kirche* (11 Jul. 2022), <https://www.joachimkuhs.de/massenexodus-rekord-bei-austritten-aus-katholischer-kirche/>, accessed on: 6 Feb. 2023.

21 Hillgruber: *Religionsausübung*, p. 129.

when they consciously seek to fish in such milieus for which certain religious practices are particularly sacred and can thus at least become secret supporters.

The Political Instrumentalization of the Topics of Secularism, Religious Freedom and Islamophobia in Turkey

Bernd Hirschberger and Friedrich Püttmann

The topics of secularism and religious freedom are central themes in political debates in Turkey. Over the course of the Turkish Republic's history, the interpretation of the terms has constantly shifted, yielding different levels of inclusiveness at different times. However, power-political interests have strongly politicized the terms at all times.

Kemalism's political instrumentalization of secularism

The Turkish Republic was built by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his supporters upon the supposedly French model of *laïcité* and the idea that religious practice should be private rather than public. The Kemalist interpretation of secularism was part of Kemalist and thus Turkish state ideology. Authoritarian secularists and leftists tended to perceive religion – in particular Islam – as a threat or competition to their positivist worldview and an obstacle to their ideological projects.¹ Therefore, for Turkey's Kemalist founding fathers, the Republic's

1 Bilgin, Pinar: "The Politics of Security and Secularism in Turkey: From the Early Republican Era to EU Accession Negotiations," in: Dietrich Jung/Catharina Raudvere (eds.), Religion, Politics, and Turkey's EU Accession, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2008, pp. 139–156, p. 141; Orhan, Gözde: "Religious Freedom Governance or Institutionalization of a Heterodox Religion? Turkey's Urban Policies with Respect to Alevi Population," in: Peace Human Rights Governance 3 (2/2019), pp. 193–214, p. 211.

main concern was “freedom from religion, and almost never freedom of religion.”²

In this interpretation, secularism was not an approach that promoted religious freedom. On the contrary, the traditional Kemalist reading of secularism implies a considerable curtailment of religious freedom. However, in practice restrictions were applied sometimes more and sometimes less strictly. For instance, since the 1960s, despite the strict Kemalist principles, it has repeatedly been possible for parties with an Islamist orientation to participate in government in Turkey.³ However, secularism has repeatedly been misused as an instrument of political control. For example, in the wake of the 1980 military coup, the (in)famous Turkish headscarf ban was enacted (as the Dress and Appearance Regulation of 1982) as a reaction to the growing influence of Islamist elements in the country.⁴ However, it took until 1997 and an ultimatum by the military for the ban to be fully enforced.⁵

The role of the topic of religious freedom in the context of the transition of power to the AKP in the 2000s

While it was long unheard of in Turkey to show one’s religiosity in public, new parties and leaders from the social periphery of Turkey gradually introduced a cultural change by no longer disguising their religious affinities. Especially the current ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who first became prime minister then president of Turkey, have placed the topic of religious freedom at the center of their politics.

In 2007, the wife of former President Abdullah Gül became the first presidential wife to wear a headscarf, inciting a serious fury among Turkey’s sec-

2 Akyol, Mustafa: “Turkey’s Troubled Experiment with Secularism. Lessons from Turkey’s Struggle to Balance Democracy and Laiklik” (25 Apr. 2019), <https://tcf.org/content/report/turkeys-troubled-experiment-secularism/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

3 Zubaida, Sami: “The survival of kemalism,” in: *Cahiers D’études Sur La Méditerranée Orientale et Le Monde Turco-Iranien* 21 (1996), pp. 291–296.

4 Arik, Hulya: “Speaking of Women? Exploring Violence against Women through Political Discourses: A Case Study of Headscarf Debates in Turkey,” in: *e-cadernos CES* 16 (2012), pp. 10–31, p. 17, <https://doi.org/10.4000/eces.1009>.

5 Wiles, Ellen: “Headscarves, Human Rights, and Harmonious Multicultural Society: Implications of the French Ban for Interpretations of Equality,” in: *Law & Society Review* 41 (3/2007), pp. 699–735, p. 709.

ularist media and citizens. Later, in 2013, the current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan lifted the headscarf ban as part of a “democratization package,” interestingly by basing himself on the fact that freedom of religion was a central value of the European Union, which Turkey was seeking to join. Indeed, by referring to the “Western” institution of the European Union, Erdoğan was able to rhetorically disarm his political opponents in the Kemalist camp, as they supported the project of European integration.

This incident became iconic in recent Turkish history and domestic political debates on religious freedom. This is the case because for Erdoğan’s supporters the issue of religious freedom has since then been closely connected to the issue of democracy and democratization overall. Within the framework of European integration, President Erdoğan liberalized many of Turkey’s institutions – whether political or economic – and reduced the influence of the Turkish military over Turkish politics, which was an explicit requirement by the EU’s *acquis communautaire* and took place against this background of several military coups that Turkey had previously experienced. This is tied to religious freedom because the Kemalist founding fathers of the Republic institutionalized the military as the guardian of the Republic’s Kemalist secular order and gave it the authority and mission to intervene in democratic politics when they saw this order (including secularism) as being at risk. Given the military’s long record of interventions against religious expression in Turkish politics (for example, Erdoğan himself was imprisoned for four months in 1999 for reciting a religious poem in public to mobilize his supporters), the curtailment of the military’s influence thus also expanded the exercise of religious freedom. These changes under Erdoğan in terms of religious freedom still matter today because they have created a profound loyalty to him among his supporters. In Turkey, it is common for people to closely associate changes in the country (from the building of roads to the spread of television) with not only certain periods but also the president of that time, and thankfully credit them for it, even if later times under the same person may be tougher. As a result, Erdoğan’s achievements regarding religious freedom have brought him strong political credit, which he partly still lives off today.

The populist reinterpretation of religious freedom under the AKP rule

While many liberal intellectuals in Turkey and large parts of the West hoped for a reconciliation of democracy and Islam through the AKP,⁶ the prospect of liberalization and democratization in Turkey was eventually disappointed. Instead, the Erdoğan-led AKP gradually adopted an illiberal interpretation of democracy.

Although references to EU integration in the context of religious freedom in Turkey have become rare these days, the AKP continues to use the semantics of human rights for its own power interests. Religious freedom is still being framed as a centerpiece of democracy. However, the notion of democracy that is referred to when doing so is no longer a democracy in terms of a liberal democracy with an emphasis on rights but in terms of the rule of the majority and the realization of their will. This change in how the ruling Islamist Turkish elite uses the term democracy also shapes the AKP's reinterpretation of religious freedom. The idea of religious freedom as a universal right to freedom benefiting all religious communities and individuals in Turkey has been replaced by a populist understanding that restricts religious freedom in a clientelistic and power-oriented way following a majoritarian and autocratic logic.

When the AKP and its leadership make demands and efforts with reference to religious freedom, it is noticeable that a single, specific population is the focus of attention: the majority group of pious, conservatively oriented Sunni Muslims. This majority – that has long felt suppressed in Turkey by the secular elites – is now encouraged to take up more space in society and the public sphere. In addition, religiously conservative politicians demand more attention to their ‘religious sensitivities,’ as it is often called in Turkish domestic political debates.⁷ The symbolically most prominent examples of this are certainly the lifting of the headscarf ban in 2013 as well as the rededication of the Hagia Sophia as a mosque in 2020, which was presented as a revision of a violation of

6 See e.g., Karakaya-Stump, Ayfer: “The AKP, sectarianism, and the Alevis’ struggle for equal rights in Turkey,” in: Celia Jenkins/Suavi Aydın/Umit Cetin (eds.), *Alevism as an Ethno-Religious Identity. Contested Boundaries*, London: Routledge 2018, pp. 53–67.

7 Bilgin: *Politics*, p. 140f., pp. 147–151; see also Alic, Anes: “Turkey’s secular-democratic tightrope,” <https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/88690>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

religious freedom.⁸ However, in their rhetoric, the AKP and its leadership also claim to promote the religious freedom of minorities. For example, in 2020, the AKP's human rights department published a report entitled "Our silent revolutions in the field of religious freedom."⁹ Nonetheless, in practice there is a visible gap between speech and actions. Even though some severe restrictions from the Kemalist era were lifted in the course of Turkey's application for EU membership,¹⁰ including restrictions discriminating against non-Muslim minorities,¹¹ experts continue to assess the state of religious freedom in Turkey as problematic. For instance, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) international research network has even observed a deterioration in its Democracy Indices in the area of religious freedom since the AKP took over government responsibilities in 2003 (the corresponding indicator fell from -0.2 in 2003 to -0.72 in

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- 8 Dogan, Taner: "Erdogan's 'New Turkey' narrative is no longer selling" (29 Sep. 2020), <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/turkey-erdogan-narrative-not-selling>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Oztig, Lacin Idil/Adisönmez, Umut Can: "Sovereignty, power, and authority: understanding the conversion of Hagia Sophia from a performative perspective," in: *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* (2023), pp. 1–21; TRT World: "Prayer restrictions lifted in Hagia Sophia," <https://www.trtworld.com/video/social-videos/prayer-restrictions-lifted-in-hagia-sophia/5f088d7c3e5d6b00171206de>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Attaman, Muhittin: "Reversion of Hagia Sophia: Normalization of Turkish politics" (29 Jul. 2020), <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/columns/reversion-of-hagia-sophia-normalization-of-turkish-politics>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.
- 9 Şahan, Fazlı: "En güzel cevap sessiz devrimler: Ayasofya'nın açılışını eleştirenler bunları görmüyor" (13 Jul. 2020), <https://www.yenisafak.com/hayat/en-guzel-cevap-sessiz-devrimler-ayasofyanin-acilisini-elestirenler-bunlari-gormuyor-3549129>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Agenzia fides: "Ayasofya, Erdogan's Party responds to criticism: religious freedom has increased with our governments" (15 Jul. 2020), http://www.fides.org/en/news/68359-ASIA_TURKEY_Ayasofya_Erdogan_s_Party_responds_to_criticism_religious_freedom_has_increased_with_our_governments, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.
- 10 Küçükcan, Talip: "Are Muslim Democrats a Threat to Secularism and Freedom of Religion? The Turkish Case," in: Allen D. Hertzke (ed.), *The Future of Religious Freedom: Global Challenges*, New York: Oxford Academic 2013, pp. 270–289; see also The Institute on Religion & Public Policy: *Institute on Religion and Public Policy Report: Religious Freedom in Turkey* (7 Oct. 2008), <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/8/34238.pdf>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.
- 11 Oztig, Lacin Idil/Aydın, Kenan: "The AKP's Approach toward Non-Muslim Minorities," in: *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 42 (2/2017), pp. 59–73.

2022).¹² Minorities remain structurally discriminated against; for example, in the field of theological formation.¹³

Moreover, the Turkish government does not shy away from drawing on (widespread) prejudices¹⁴ against religious minorities and even fuels them through political agitation¹⁵ to gain the sympathy of Turkey's Sunni majority or divert attention from political problems for which the government is responsible. For example, the U.S. State Department remarked in its 2022 International Religious Freedom Report that the Turkish government "continued to treat Alevi Islam as a heterodox Muslim 'sect' and categorized Alevi worship as cultural rather than religious,"¹⁶ and did not recognize Alevi houses of worship. Moreover, individuals affiliated with the AKP have repeatedly made use of anti-Semitic or anti-Zionist codes and narratives. Even though anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism were already widespread long before the AKP came to power, it is noticeable that the media environment close to the AKP now feels emboldened to openly express respective prejudices.¹⁷ For example, in publications such as the popular documentary *Üst Akıl* ("Mastermind") by the pro-government TV station *A Haber*, parallels to the anti-Semitic conspir-

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- 12 Varieties of Democracy: The V-Dem Project, https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariabLeGraph/, accessed on: 26. Oct. 2023. Indicator: "Freedom of Religion," negative trend also for the indicator "Religious Organization Repression."
 - 13 Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz/Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (eds.): 3. Ökumenischer Bericht zur Religionsfreiheit weltweit 2023. Eine christliche Perspektive auf ein universelles Menschenrecht (= Gemeinsame Texte Nr. 28), Bonn/Hannover 2023, pp. 163–168.
 - 14 Freedom House: Freedom in the World 2023. Turkey, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2023>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.
 - 15 Hintz, Lisel: "Challenges to Religious Freedom among Religious Minorities in Turkey," <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Lisel%20Hintz-%20SAIS.pdf>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.
 - 16 U.S. Department of State: 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Turkey, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/turkey/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.
 - 17 Bali, Rifat N.: "Antisemitism in Turkey: A New Phenomenon or More of the Same?," in: Armin Lange/Kerstin Mayerhofer/Dina Porat/Lawrence H. Schiffmann (eds.), *Confronting Antisemitism in Modern Media, the Legal and Political Words*, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2021, pp. 223–238, p. 232f; Waldmann, Simon A.: "Erdogan, the AKP and Antisemitism" (1 Jun. 2016), <https://isgap.org/flashpoint/erdogan-the-akp-and-antisemitism/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

acy theory about the “Wise Men of Zion” are noticeable.¹⁸ Moreover, Erdoğan himself occasionally toys with such sentiments. However, in contrast to his political mentor, Necmettin Erbakan, this seems to be motivated by political calculations rather than ideological convictions.¹⁹

In addition, the AKP-led government’s control-oriented religious policy towards both the Sunni majority and religious minorities stands in conflict with a human rights-based interpretation of freedom of religion or belief: regarding the Sunni majority, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) – which had already been used by Kemalist governments to exert influence – remains an important instrument of control for the AKP.²⁰ Nonetheless, control is also a central goal for its religious policy towards minorities. As a part of this, the government is increasingly attempting to influence the leadership of the religious communities, including the elections of patriarchs and chief rabbis.²¹

Altogether, it becomes evident that both its (alleged) commitment to religious freedom and its positioning towards secularism as well as the Turkish government’s religious policy as a whole are not primarily oriented towards human rights but rather power-political interests. Both the focus on the majority group of conservative Sunni Muslims and the prioritization of their in-

18 Balke, Ralf: “Antisemitismus spielt eine ganz zentrale Rolle: Simon Waldman über den Besuch von Recep Tayyip Erdogan, das Verhältnis zu Israel und Judenhass” (27 Sep. 2018), <https://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/juedische-welt/antisemitismus-spielt-eine-ganz-zentrale-rolle/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Baer, Marc David: “Erdoğan accuses Germany of echoing the Nazis – but his own record on anti-Semitism is shameful” (13 Apr. 2017), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/04/13/erdogan-accuses-germany-of-echoing-the-nazis-but-his-own-record-on-anti-semitism-is-shameful/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Baer, Marc David: “Erdoğan und die Zinslobby” (10 Jun. 2017), <https://taz.de/Debatte-Antisemitismus-in-der-AKP!/5410004/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

19 Bali: Antisemitism, p. 228.

20 Yildirim, Mine: “TURKEY: The Diyanet – the elephant in Turkey’s religious freedom room?,” in: Forum 18 News (4 May 2011), <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4dc24d952.pdf>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Yilmaz, Isan/Albayrak, Ismail: Populist and Pro-Violence State Religion. The Diyanet’s Construction of Erdoğanist Islam in Turkey, Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore 2022; Seufert, Günter: The changing nature of the Turkish State Authority for Religious Affairs (ARA) and Turkish Islam in Europe, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik 2020.

21 Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz/Kirchenamt der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland (eds.): Ökumenischer Bericht, p. 166.

terests as well as the instrumentalization of prejudices against minorities ultimately emerge from an attempt to please a large electoral group and gather their votes for the AKP.

Polarization of the political debates about religious freedom and secularism and the opposition's likewise populist reaction

The AKP strongly relies on the use of identity politics and a harsh tone against the political opposition. For instance, despite claiming to be religiously tolerant, the pejorative term *gavur* (infidel) – a term used to refer to Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire's tax registers and which has become an insult to non-Muslims and non-believers – is a common element in the AKP's repertoire of rhetorical attacks on political opponents.²² Furthermore, the AKP often uses a logic of “we vs. others”²³ when dealing with political opponents and claims to speak for “the people” whereas opponents are portrayed as “the enemy” of the people.²⁴ It is also not uncommon for the AKP to accuse political opponents of being Islamophobic.²⁵

On the other hand, the secular Kemalist-oriented forces in the opposition criticized the fact that Erdoğan's references to the EU and democratization merely served as a fig leaf for him to advance his secret agenda of gradually Islamising Turkish society and introducing conservative cultural change.

22 Ertan, Nazlan: “Turkey's rulers need to stop using the word ‘infidel’” (19 Apr. 2021), <https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkeys-rulers-need-to-stop-using-the-word-infidel-article-57131>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Liphshiz, Cnaan: “Turkey school textbooks call Jews and Christians ‘infidels’” (5 Mar. 2021), <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antemitism/turkey-school-textbooks-call-jews-and-christians-infidels-661051>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Erdemir, Aykan/Maenza, Nadine: “Turkey Needs to Change its Policy and Rhetoric Toward Religious Minorities | Opinion” (29 Apr. 2021), <https://www.newswweek.com/turkey-needs-change-its-policy-rhetoric-toward-religious-minorities-opinion-1586803>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

23 Hintz: Challenges.

24 Yılmaz, Ihsan: “Erdoğan's Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist,” in: ECPS Leader Profiles. European Center for Populism Studies (14 Feb. 2021), <https://www.populismstudies.org/erdogans-political-journey-from-victimised-muslim-democrat-to-authoritarian-islamist-populist/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

25 Aydındag, Didem/İsksal, Huseyin: “Securitization of Identity in Turkey During the AKP Era,” in: *Revista Gênero e Interdisciplinaridade* 2 (1/2021), pp. 498–523, p. 515.

This rhetoric can be seen as a reaction to the shock of their loss of power with their own, different form of populism. While the AKP's populism focuses on the interests of the Sunni majority, this "secular populism"²⁶ focuses on a glorification, idealization and romanticization of Kemalist secularism while largely ignoring its deficits and curtailments of democracy and human rights. As a result, the aggressive populist style of the government as well as the at times populist reactionary strategies of the opposition contribute to a strong polarization of the debates on religious freedom and secularism in Turkey and Turkish society as a whole. While fierce mutual attacks continue to characterize the culture of political debate in Turkey, a repositioning of the oppositional Republican People's Party's (CHP) approach to secularism has become apparent in recent years.

After the strategy of secular populism had proven unsuccessful, the party began to loosen its ideological principles regarding Kemalist secularism and in turn also tried to appeal to conservative Muslim voters.²⁷ For example, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu – presidential candidate of the main opposition parties in 2023 – advocated a doctrine of *helalleşme* (reconciliation) in the run-up to the general elections, particularly targeting the religiously conservative Muslim part of the population.²⁸ Already in 2017, the CHP leader had presented his party as a "defender of the freedom of religion and conscience," protecting various lifestyles, including conservative ones.²⁹ In October 2022, breaking with a rigid application of Kemalist principles, Kılıçdaroğlu proposed a law to protect the right to

26 Tambar, Kabir: "Secular Populism and the Semiotics of the Crowd in Turkey," in: *Public Culture* 21 (3/2009), pp. 517–537.

27 See e.g., Bajec, Alessandra: "Turkey's opposition opens up to the hijab" (12 May 2023), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/12/turkeys-opposition-opens-up-to-the-hijab>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Aydın, Selçuk: "Turkey elections: Why the CHP has changed its stance on headscarves" (12 Oct. 2022), <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/turkey-elections-why-chp-has-changed-its-stance-headscarves>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

28 Kendrick, Leo: "Opposition leader's call for reconciliation spark discussion on Turkey's historical wrongdoings and current polarization" (19 Nov. 2023), <https://medyascope.tv/2021/11/19/opposition-leaders-call-for-reconciliation-spark-discussion-on-turkeys-historical-wrongdoings-and-current-polarization/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

29 BirCün Daily: "CHP the 'guarantor of lifestyles' in Turkey" (23 Oct. 2017), <https://www.birgun.net/haber/chp-the-guarantor-of-lifestyles-in-turkey-186045>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

wear headscarves even in public institutions.³⁰ The AKP's reaction to such advances from the ranks of the opposition is typically to outdo them. For example, the AKP suggested that the right to wear a headscarf should even be included in the constitution via an amendment³¹ and even more strongly drew on an anti-LGBT rhetoric in an alleged defense of the traditional family.³² In the struggle for votes from the conservative population, they portrayed the opposition as “pro-LGBT,” while according to them only the government alliance protected the “sanctity of the family.”³³

The instrumentalization of the fight against Islamophobia as a diaspora and foreign policy tool

The topic of religious freedom also plays a central role in the AKP-led government's rhetoric in the realm of international politics. In particular, the AKP has established the fight against Islamophobia as a central theme of Turkish foreign and diaspora policy.

In doing so, the AKP is certainly taking up an important issue, as xenophobic and also Islamophobic prejudices are widespread in many Western countries. There is often a lack of commitment to counteracting the corresponding group-focused enmity. On the contrary, many media sources in Western countries offer considerable space to corresponding narratives, and sometimes even politicians and parties from the democratic center take up rhetorics and proposals from the far right in the hope of gaining voters' ap-

30 Euro|topics: “Turkey: CHP calls for law protecting headscarves” (7 Oct. 2022), <https://www.eurotopics.net/en/289620/turkey-chp-calls-for-law-protecting-headscarves>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

31 Daily Sabah: “Turkish constitutional committee approves amendment on headscarf” (25 Jan. 2023), <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/legislation/turkish-constitutional-committee-approves-amendment-on-headscarf>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

32 Wilks, Andrew: “Headscarf debate returns to Turkish politics at initiative of secularist opposition” (6 Oct. 2022), <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/10/headscarf-debate-returns-turkish-politics-initiative-secularist-opposition>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

33 Stockholm Center for Freedom: “Erdoğan reiterates plan for anti-LGBT constitutional amendment” (7 Jun. 2023), <https://stockholmcf.org/erdogan-reiterates-plan-for-anti-lgbt-constitutional-amendment/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

proval in this way. This lays the ground for the AKP and its leadership to take up this issue in a populist way.

Especially ahead of elections in Turkey, leading AKP politicians are conspicuous for using a very harsh tone to attack Western allies. For example, in 2017, in the run-up to the constitutional referendum on the expansion of the presidential powers, Erdoğan criticized a controversial ruling by the European Court of Justice on the wearing of religious symbols by employees as a “crusade struggle against the (Muslim) crescent.”³⁴ Moreover, after having been denied entry to the Netherlands to campaign for the referendum, Foreign Minister Cavuşoğlu warned of “religious wars”³⁵ in Europe and claimed that there was “no difference between Dutch social democrats and the fascist Wilders.”³⁶ Before the 2018 Turkish general elections, Erdoğan in turn sharply attacked the Austrian chancellor for his actions against “political Islam” and the closure of mosques, focusing less on factual criticism and more on questioning Kurz’s ability to govern due to his young age.³⁷ During campaign rallies ahead of the 2019 local elections, President Erdoğan played a video of the Islamophobic attack on a Christchurch mosque, even though minors were also present,³⁸ sharply attacked New Zealand and Australia,³⁹ accusing “the West of ‘preparing’ the manifesto of the Christchurch attacker” and claiming “that the West

34 Arab News: “Erdoğan accuses EU of launching anti-Islam ‘crusade’” (16 Mar. 2017), <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1069161/amp>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

35 VOA News: “Turkey’s Top Diplomat Warns of Religious Wars in Europe” (16 Mar. 2017), <https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-warns-of-religious-wars-in-europe/3768816.html>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

36 Khalidi, Ari: “Turkey FM expects religious wars in Europe” (16 Mar. 2017), <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/11036-Turkey-FM-expects-religious-wars-in-Europe>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

37 Bernath, Markus: “Neue Attacken von Tayyip Erdoğan gegen Sebastian Kurz” (11 Jun. 2018), <https://www.derstandard.de/story/2000081350287/neue-attacken-erdogans-gegen-kurz>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Innerhofer, Hannes: “Unmoralischer Kanzler: Erdoğan greift Sebastian Kurz heftig an” (2 Jun. 2018), <https://www.unsertirol24.com/2018/06/02/unmoralischer-kanzler-erdogan-greift-sebastian-kurz-heftig-an/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

38 Tremblay, Pinar: “Erdoğan took Christchurch shooting to campaign trail” (19 Mar. 2019), <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/03/turkey-erdogan-took-christchurch-shooting-to-campaign-trail.html>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2019.

39 Ozerkan, Fulya: “Erdoğan calls for fight on Islamophobia like ‘anti-Semitism after Holocaust’” (22 Mar. 2019), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/erdogan-calls-for-fight-on-islamophobia-like-anti-semitism-after-holocaust/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

and Western media have remained silent about the massacre,” promising to bring the attacker to justice if New Zealand would not, and calling on New Zealand to reinstate the death penalty.⁴⁰ Furthermore, in 2020 he engaged in heated arguments with French President Emmanuel Macron, claiming that the latter needed “mental treatment”⁴¹ and calling for a boycott of French products.⁴² Fahrettin Altun – then-President of the Directorate of Communications of Turkey – also accused Macron of anti-Muslim rhetoric and following “the old Fascist playbook that targeted Jews in Europe in this manner.”⁴³ The AKP’s language in its fight against Islamophobia is thus characterized by personal attacks and strong polemics. Inappropriate comparisons of allegedly Islamophobic politics with the “crusades,”⁴⁴ the Holocaust⁴⁵ or the Covid-19 pandemic⁴⁶

40 Weise, Zia: “Turkey’s Erdoğan invokes Christchurch attacks on campaign trail” (20 Mar. 2019), <https://www.politico.eu/article/erdogan-invokes-christchurch-attacks-on-campaign-trail/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2019.

41 Deutsche Welle: “Erdoğan blasts Macron and ‘Islamophobia’ in Europe” (24 Oct. 2020), <https://www.dw.com/en/erdogan-says-macron-needs-mental-treatment-blasts-europes-islamophobia/a-55385180>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

42 Devamı, Haberin: “President Erdoğan calls for boycott of French goods” (26 Oct. 2020), <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/president-erdogan-calls-for-boycott-of-french-goods-159484>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

43 Zontur, Erdoğan Çağatay: “Turkey’s Communications director slams French president” (27 Oct. 2020), <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkeys-communications-director-slams-french-president/2020206>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

44 See e.g., Deutsche Welle: “Erdoğan accuses EU of ‘crusade’ against Islam” (17 Mar. 2017), <https://www.dw.com/en/erdogan-accuses-eu-of-crusade-against-islam/a-37979126>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

45 See e.g., Aharon, Eldad Ben: “Erdoğan’s comparison of Islamophobia, antisemitism doesn’t work – opinion” (17 Dec. 2020), <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/erdogans-comparison-of-islamophobia-antisemitism-doesnt-work-opinion-652489>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye: “The rising Islamophobia in the West has turned into an all-out attack on our Book, our Prophet and all our sacred values” (26 Oct. 2020), <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/122501/-the-rising-islamophobia-in-the-west-has-turned-into-an-all-out-attack-on-our-book-our-prophet-and-all-our-sacred-values->, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

46 See e.g., Höhler, Gerd: “Türkischer Staatschef vergleicht Islamophobie mit dem Holocaust” (14 May 2021), <https://www.rnd.de/politik/tuerkischer-staatschef-vergleicht-islamophobie-mit-dem-holocaust-BYFWYZTHZNCJDNQY6WMLALGIVE.html>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

as well as accusations of supporting terrorists are recurring elements of this jargon.⁴⁷

This suggests that the motivation behind this rhetoric is more rooted in the Turkish government's own power-political interests than in actually protecting Muslim minorities in Europe:

The topic of the fight against Islamophobia offers President Erdoğan and his party the opportunity to stage Erdoğan himself in the heroic role of the “defender” of Islam and Islamic values and traditions as well as the “champion” against Islamophobia.⁴⁸ Adopting the language of colonial liberation and the fight against oppression, the Turkish government presents itself as the “voice of the voiceless.”⁴⁹ In this way, it hopes to gain approval and sympathy among Turkish voters, especially among the large diaspora in Western countries and to expand its public diplomacy vis-à-vis Muslim societies abroad. This rhetoric goes hand in hand with Turkey's domestic discourse about conservative Muslims' victimhood.⁵⁰

In some cases, the references to the problem of Islamophobia are also used to place pressure on partners to obtain political concessions that can be presented as domestic successes. A prominent example of this is the Turkish government's blockade of Sweden's NATO accession in 2022/23 after rallies with Quran burnings took place there. While the Turkish government publicly called for “sincere steps from Sweden in the fight against Islamophobia,”⁵¹ other in-

47 See e.g., Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye: Islamophobia; *Hürriyet Daily News*: “Turkey's Erdoğan says his only concern is Islam, takes jab at atheists” (2 Aug. 2015), <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-erdogan-says-his-only-concern-is-islam-takes-jab-at-atheists-86228>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

48 See e.g., Hussein, Rikar: “How Turkey's Erdogan Portrayed Syria Offensive as a Pan-Islam Struggle” (13 Nov. 2019), https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch_how-turkeys-erdogan-portrayed-syria-offensive-pan-islam-struggle/6179309.html, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

49 See e.g., Mengü, Nevşin: “How China's influence flipped Turkey's position on Uighurs” (27 Jan. 2021), <https://www.duvarenglish.com/how-chinas-influence-flipped-turkeys-position-on-uighurs-article-56020>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

50 Yesil, Bilge: “Mediating Muslim Victimhood: An Analysis of Religion and Populism in International Communication,” in: *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023), pp. 2904–2924.

51 Zorlu, Faruk: “Türkiye concerned by ‘increasing anti-Islamic rhetoric, actions in Europe’: President Erdogan” (1 Feb. 2023), <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/turkiye-concerned-by-increasing-anti-islamic-rhetoric-actions-in-europe-president-erdogan/2803868>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

terests were also at stake, including the extradition of Kurdish activists and increased access to US military equipment.⁵²

The political power perspective thus seems to prevail over the normative one and the Turkish government's primary concern appears to be to harvest political capital out of its criticism of others. This is shown not only by the fact that this rhetoric is used especially during election campaigns but also that the criticism of Islamophobia in other, non-Western countries is very selective. For example, the Turkish government is conspicuously reticent about criticizing the Chinese regime's treatment of the majority Muslim minority of the Uyghurs.⁵³ It is also striking that countries that are portrayed as the worst perpetrators in the Turkish government's rhetoric at one point in time are often presented later again as the closest partners and friends, and vice versa, insofar as this is politically opportune.⁵⁴

Conclusion

To conclude, the role of religious freedom in Turkish domestic political debates can hardly be understated as it represents a pivotal arena for Turkey's general struggle over democracy and its meaning, and because – given the major role of identity politics in Turkey – it remains an issue that can determine elections.

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- 52 Al Jazeera: "Turkey's been busy at NATO: Sweden's bid, F-16s and war mediation" (13 Jul. 2023), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/13/turkeys-busy-nato-swedens-bid-f-16-jets-war-mediation>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.
- 53 Mengü: China's Influence; Dorian, Jones: "Turkish Opposition Challenge Erdogan Over Uighur Silence" (28 Jan. 2021), https://www.voanews.com/a/europe_turkish-opposition-challenge-erdogan-over-uighur-silence/6201354.html, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.
- 54 See e.g., Turkey's relations with the governments of Israel: Frantzman, Seth J.: "Turkey's shift from hating Israel to mending relations – analysis" (22 Sep. 2022), <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-717859>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023; Sariaslan, Kübra Zeynep/Avetisyan, Armine: "What the Turkish election means for Armenia-Turkey relations" (18 May 2023), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2023/05/18/what-the-turkish-election-means-for-armenia-turkey-relations/>, accessed on: 11 Oct. 2023.

Populism, Religious Identity, and the Instrumentalization of “Religious Freedom” in the United States during the Era of Donald Trump

T. Jeremy Gunn

Introduction: Christian identity rather than gospel Christianity

One of the most important populist movements in the history of the United States (U.S.) began in 2015 with Donald Trump’s successful campaign for the American presidency. This populist movement – often named “MAGA” (“Make America Great Again”) – deployed traditional populist rhetoric of “the people” against the “elites” and appealed to widespread resentments against entrenched politicians and established interests. Within the MAGA movement, one salient theme was that religious freedom was under attack in America and that it was necessary for religious people to mobilize and “to take back the country.” The White Evangelical community was a key demographic component of the MAGA movement that led to the electoral victory of Trump in November 2016.¹ Although the majority of White Evangelicals – both leaders and grassroots – were initially skeptical of Trump and his candidacy due to his dubious moral character, a full 77% of White Evangelicals ultimately voted for him for president (as opposed to 16% for Hillary Clinton). This chapter will refer to Trump’s White Evangelical supporters, combined with others who adopted his religio-political themes, as “MAGA Christians.”

1 The term “evangelical” traditionally refers to people who share with others the good news of the New Testament and the gift of salvation offered to mankind through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. As used in the United States – and differently from how the terms is generally used in Europe – “Evangelical” refers to a trinitarian subgroup of Protestant Christianity that traditionally emphasizes the infallibility of the Bible. There are numerous varieties of American Evangelicalism, and between 10% and 15% might be identified as “progressive” or “liberal.”

Why did White Evangelicals, who initially were skeptical of Trump, become arguably the strongest MAGA supporters? This chapter argues that the Trump candidacy and presidency successfully instrumentalized the themes of “religious freedom” and “religious identity” to mobilize these supporters, a demographic group that was critical for his electoral success. Trump and the MAGA Christians did not invoke the Gospel themes of caring for the sick and injured, giving to the poor, loving one’s enemies, turning the other cheek, helping widows and orphans, forgiveness, or praying in private.² Rather, they prioritized Christian identity themes, including “Christians versus Muslims,” attacking one’s enemies, encouraging state financial support for Christians, promoting public displays of Christian symbols, as well as the use of the rhetoric of “religious freedom.”

Instrumentalizing religious freedom to win an election

For more than a hundred years, Evangelicals (including Fundamentalists) had insisted that a worthy moral character is a necessary qualification for anyone seeking public office. Among the many vices that traditionally were seen as disqualifying for candidates were extra-marital sex, divorce, ignorance of religion, dishonesty, and gambling. Between the 1920s and 1940s, many conservative Christians refused even to vote or participate in politics because it was seen as inherently corrupt. By the 1970s, the willingness of Evangelicals to engage in political activity had grown considerably, and 1979 to 1980 marked a sea change with the creation of the Moral Majority and several other religious-political activist groups that promoted Republican Party candidates.

At the time of his June 2015 announcement, Donald Trump was already a public figure who was well known for his New York-style braggadocio, pursuit of self-aggrandizing publicity, promiscuous sexual behavior, showy displays of wealth, promotion of commercial ventures branded with the name “Trump,” hosting a popular reality-television show where he frequently insulted participants, ownership of casinos, as well as his bankruptcies and spectacular business failures (three Trump casinos in Atlantic City, Trump Airlines, Trump University, Trump Vodka, Trump Steaks, and Trump Magazine). A thrice-married man, he frequently and publicly boasted of his extra-marital sexual escapades and having impregnated girlfriends while married to other women.

2 Matthew 6:5–6. See discussion below.

In addition to his disreputable lifestyle, Trump had no recognizable knowledge or interest in the religious values that are at the heart of the Evangelical worldview.³ Trump was never comfortable responding to questions about religion, and typically answered them in such a way as to turn the focus away from God and onto himself. At the time when Trump announced his candidacy, not only was his knowledge of religion superficial, but he had earlier made statements on homosexuality and abortion that were unacceptable to Evangelicals.

There are several positions that are widely shared in the conservative Evangelical community regarding religio-political issues:

- Promotion of “religious freedom” (and freedom from persecution for Christians);
- Opposition to abortion;
- Opposition to gay marriage and other LGBTQ rights;
- Appointing Supreme Court justices who oppose abortion and favor religious freedom;
- Favoring religious exemptions from laws of general applicability;
- Promoting religion in public schools;
- Promoting public prayer in schools and in governmental bodies;
- The threat posed by Muslims;⁴
- Military and financial support for the State of Israel;
- Encouraging state financial support for religion (including opposition to the “Johnson Amendment” to the federal tax code).⁵

3 See Critchlow, Donald T.: *The Conservative Ascendancy. How the GOP Right Made Political History*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2007, where Trump's name does not appear; Balmer, Randall: *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*, Waco: Baylor University Press 2004; Sutton, Matthew A.: *American Apocalypse. A History of Modern Evangelicalism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2014; Wodak, Ruth: *The Politics of Fear. What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*, London: Sage Publications Ltd 2015; Thompson, Michael J.: *Confronting the New Conservatism. The Rise of the Right in America*, New York: New York University Press 2007; Critchlow, Donald T.: *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism. A Woman's Crusade*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2005.

4 “[W]hite evangelical Protestants tend to express more reservations about Muslims and Islam than do those in other religious groups.” Pew Research Center: *U.S. Muslims concerned about their place in society, but continue to believe in the American dream* (26 Jul. 2015), p. 127, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/07/26/findings-from-pew-research-centers-2017-survey-of-us-muslims/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

5 For the Johnson Amendment, see below.

During the first six months of his campaign, Trump largely ignored or was ignorant of the importance of these themes to Evangelical voters. For example, he did not mention any of them in his declaration of candidacy on June 16, 2015. He did not even bother to attend the first major forum in 2015 for Evangelical voters. He was the only Republican candidate not to appear at the event, sponsored by the Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas, on October 18, 2015. So foreign was Trump to Evangelicals at the time that his absence – as reported at the time – “practically went unmentioned.” The polls at the end of 2015 gave him less than 20% of the Evangelical vote.

In December 2015, as he came to understand that he was not gaining sufficient support from the key Evangelical community, Trump began to promote their favored religio-political themes. In that month, he hit squarely on one of the principal Evangelical anxieties when he issued a press release accusing Muslims of endangering the religious freedom of Americans and promising to ban them from entering the United States if he were to be elected president. Trump then sought a high-profile endorsement from the well-known Jerry Falwell Jr., President of Liberty University, and the namesake of one of the most famous and controversial Evangelical leaders of the 20th century. Trump was invited to speak at Liberty University in January 2016, in the same lecture series where candidate Ted Cruz had been enthusiastically welcomed a few weeks earlier.

In his Liberty University address in 2016, Trump vaguely called for the need to protect Christianity, albeit without explaining exactly why, where, or how. He did not yet link religious freedom to any of the trigger terms associated with it: abortion, gay marriage, or the Supreme Court. His stumbling message mentioned “we are going to protect Christianity [...] I do not have to be politically correct. [applause] We’re going to protect it, you know. We’re going to protect it. You know.”

A week after Trump delivered the speech that demonstrated little familiarity with the Evangelical religion or Evangelical positions, Jerry Falwell Jr. stunned the Evangelical world by endorsing the worldly and biblically illiterate Donald Trump for president. While benefiting Trump’s credibility within the Evangelical community, Falwell’s endorsement was sharply criticized by many

prominent Evangelical leaders who continued to insist that Trump did not have the moral character to be president.⁶

Over the next six months, Trump gradually began to articulate the religio-political themes favored by Evangelicals and MAGA Christians by emphasizing the danger of Muslims, the evil of abortion, the growing threat to religious freedom, appointing favorable Justices to the Supreme Court, and promoting state funding for religious activities. After many victories in Republican Party primaries, it became clear that Trump would win the Republican nomination for president. With the combined interest of the MAGA Christians in supporting the victorious candidate and Trump's interest in enlisting the enthusiastic support of Evangelical leadership, the candidate met with more than 1,000 influential Evangelical leaders and representatives on June 21, 2016, in the Marriott Marquis hotel on Times Square in New York City. Among the participants were former candidates Mike Huckabee and Ben Carson, whom Trump had soundly defeated, but also some of the most famous Evangelicals in the country, including Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell Jr., James Dobson, Tony Perkins, James Robison, and Kelly Shackelford. At this June 21 meeting, the leaders described themselves as a gathering of spiritual people doing God's work.

Trump acceded to and promoted the core Evangelical religio-political positions at the Marriott Marquis meeting. He and the gathered leaders agreed that:

- Religious freedom is under attack in America and the Johnson amendment is an infringement on religious liberty.
- There is a need to appoint Supreme Court justices that would support MAGA Christian positions on abortion, religious freedom, and gay rights.
- Trump had been able to overcome many difficulties and obtain electoral victories due to God's intervention in the election.
- Trump possesses identifiable and necessary moral and spiritual qualities for holding public office.
- Political divisions in the United States should not be understood as legitimate differences among alternative approaches to complicated issues, but as a stark contrast between good and evil.
- There should be unquestioned support for the State of Israel.

6 Collins, Eliza: "Christian leaders balk at Falwell's Trump Endorsement" (26 Jan. 2016), <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/01/jerry-falwell-jr-endorses-trump-218238>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

- Trump is a strong and forceful leader who will protect Americans from enemies, foreign and domestic.⁷

Between the time that he announced his candidacy in June 2015 and his presidential victory with strong Evangelical support in November 2016, Trump had not changed his moral character nor revealed any increased knowledge about religion. While Trump's character did not change as he sought Evangelical support, he did change his campaign message by newly emphasizing the fears and concerns of the Evangelical community, most particularly the dangers posed by Muslims, that Christianity was under threat, and the need to appoint Supreme Court justices who would promote religious freedom and end abortion. Trump thus instrumentalized the rhetoric of religious freedom to enlist the support of the crucial Evangelical voting bloc, which enabled him to defeat Hillary Clinton in November 2016. As president, he would later instrumentalize religious freedom to mobilize support for his political objectives.

Instrumentalization of religious freedom by MAGA Christians and the Trump administration

The Supreme Court, abortion, and gay rights

Among the many social-political issues of concern to MAGA Christians, there are two clusters that recur most frequently: first, those related to family planning (including most importantly abortion but also contraception); and second, issues related to gender identity (including gay marriage, gay rights, and transgender rights). Although the Gospels speak eloquently and clearly about the importance of loving one's neighbor, giving to the poor, and ministering to the sick, it was not these Gospel-articulated issues that motivated MAGA Christians' political engagement, but opposition to abortion and gender rights, neither of which was ever raised in the Gospels.

There is compelling evidence that the issue of abortion held little initial interest to the Evangelical community in 1973 at the time of the Supreme Court

7 A transcript of the closed-door event can be found at Ward, Jon: "Transcript: Donald Trump's closed-door meeting with evangelical leaders" (22 Jun. 2016), <https://news.yahoo.com/transcript-donald-trumps-closed-door-meeting-with-evangelical-leaders-195810824.html?guccounter=1>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

case *Roe v. Wade* constitutionally legalized the right to abortion.⁸ However, in 1979, as part of a political strategy to consolidate conservative religious communities – including Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, Christian Orthodox, conservative Roman Catholics, and conservative Jews – into a unified voting bloc to aid the Republican Party, several influential persons agreed to frame abortion as the defining moral issue of our time. This newly discovered moral issue helped Republicans elect Ronald Reagan in 1980. Prior to 1979, the legality of abortion had troubled Catholics but not Protestants. After 1979, it became both a galvanizing and polarizing topic in American politics.

In 2015 and 2016, as Trump came to understand the importance of the issue to the Evangelical community and to gain their support, he spoke out in opposition to abortion and promised to appoint Justices to the Supreme Court who would overrule *Roe v. Wade*. Trump was later able to appoint three justices (with Senate confirmation) who stated during their Senate confirmation hearings that *Roe* was “settled law” and that they did not foresee overruling it. However, the first time that the opportunity presented itself, to the delight of Trump and MAGA Christians, all three Trump judges reversed their stated positions on abortion being settled law and voted with other justices to overturn *Roe* in the 2022 decision *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, 597 U.S. ____ (2022).

Instrumentalizing “religious freedom” as a two-edged sword: Seeking state benefits on the grounds of religious freedom

Under American and international human rights law, *the state* is prohibited from discrimination among religious groups, and should not demonstrate preferences or prejudice regarding the differences among Catholics, Hindus, Protestants, Muslims, or Buddhists. At the same time, both in the United States and internationally, *religious people and religious groups* are allowed to discriminate on the basis of religion. Religions are not obligated to allow non-members to participate in sacred religious rituals, hire people of other religions to preside at religious ceremonies, or to admit into membership those whose values or behavior are anathema to their religion. Thus, under

8 See Balmer, Randall: Redeemer. The Life of Jimmy Carter, New York: Basic Books 2014; Balmer, Randall: Bad Faith. Race and the Rise of the Religious Right, Chicago: William B. Eerdmans Press 2021; and Balmer, Randall: “The Religious Right and the Abortion Myth” (10 May 2022), <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/05/10/abortion-history-right-white-evangelical-1970s-00031480>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

basic principles of law, *state discrimination on the basis of religion is prohibited while religious individuals and entities are permitted to discriminate on the basis of their religious beliefs*. However, this critical difference between the impermissibility of state discrimination and the permissibility of private discrimination becomes problematic when individuals and groups are able to instrumentalize the authority of the state to discriminate while simultaneously invoking their “religious freedom” as a shield to allow them to discriminate. To a great extent, this is exactly what MAGA Christians and the Trump administration promoted: instrumentalizing the rhetoric of religious freedom to insist upon their equal right to obtain governmental resources (such as state financial support for religious hospitals and schools) while simultaneously insisting on their religious freedom right to use state resources to discriminate against others. We may characterize this two-part use of “religious freedom” as a two-edged sword. On the one hand, religious freedom is invoked (defensively) to demand equal treatment to obtain state benefits, but then is used (offensively) to insist on the right to use state benefits to discriminate against others.

Trump administration actions to provide state financial benefits

With the active encouragement of the MAGA Christian community, the Trump administration (2017–2021) issued more than a dozen orders and regulations to help religious individuals and groups obtain government benefits or exemptions from federal law, and then permit the beneficiaries of governmental support to claim their “religious freedom” right to discriminate against others whose values and interests differ from their own. The two most important examples were Executive Order (EO) 13798 “Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty” (May 4, 2017)⁹ and EO 13831 “Establishment of a White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative” (May 3, 2018)¹⁰. Pursuant to EO 13798, the U.S. Attorney General issued guidelines for all federal agencies entitled “Federal Law Protections for Religious Liberty” (Oct. 6, 2017)¹¹. Following the issuance of these two Executive Orders and Attorney General guidelines, the Department of Health

9 82 Fed. Reg. 21675 (9 May 2017), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2017-05-09/pdf/2017-09574.pdf>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023.

10 83 Fed. Reg. 20715 (8 May 2018), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2018-05-08/pdf/2018-09895.pdf>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023.

11 Attorney General [Jeff Sessions]: Federal Law Protections for Religious Liberty (6 Oct. 2017), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1001891/download>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023.

and Human Services (HHS) in turn issued a series of orders and regulations that applied to government agencies, non-profit organizations, and for-profit businesses owned or operated by people making religious freedom claims. The HHS rules were designed to facilitate religious freedom objections to laws of general applicability, particularly regarding family planning (contraception and pregnancy) and providing services to the LGBTQ community.

The HHS regulations undercut the rules of the Affordable Care Act (ACA, popularly known as Obamacare) that required qualifying employers to provide contraception coverage for their employees. Although churches and religious institutions were already exempt from this mandate in the ACA, the Trump administration – by executive fiat – extended this exemption to include not only religious organizations, but also for-profit businesses that claimed religious freedom exemptions.¹² Other regulations enhanced the authority of federally subsidized health care providers to limit access to medical care for the LGBTQ community. The Department of Housing and Urban Development proposed rules to allow federally subsidized homeless shelters to refuse access to transgender people.

Both the White House (under EO 13831) and the HHS also created offices to advise on policies to promote religious exemptions to laws. These offices openly invited and welcomed the participation of religious leaders in policy formulation. President Trump claimed substantial credit for these initiatives.

Reminding MAGA Christians of his promises as a candidate, President Trump also claimed to have abolished the Johnson amendment in EO 13798:

“As I campaigned across the country, faith leaders explained that they were prevented from speaking their minds because of a 1954 rule known as the Johnson Amendment. I spoke about it a lot. Under this rule, if a pastor, priest, or imam speaks about issues of public or political importance, they are threatened with the loss of their tax-exempt status, a crippling financial punishment. Very, very unfair. But no longer.”¹³

12 Pear, Robert/Ruiz, Rebecca R./Goodstein, Laurie: “Trump Administration Rolls Back Birth Control Mandate” (6 Oct. 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/06/us/politics/trump-contraception-birth-control.html>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

13 Trump, Donald J.: Remarks on Signing a Proclamation on the National Day of Prayer and an Executive Order Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty (4 May 2017), <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-signing-proclamation-the-national-day-prayer-and-executive-order-promoting-free>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

Given that the Johnson amendment is statutory law, and has not been repealed, Trump's claim was exaggerated. It would be more accurate to say that Johnson amendment had rarely been enforced prior to Trump, and then only in extreme cases, and that the longstanding policy effectively did not change under Trump.

The Trump administration and MAGA Christian identity

Public prayer and religious displays

In the Gospels, Jesus criticized the “hypocrites” who ostentatiously pray in public so that others might see them (Matthew 6:5–6). Repudiating the form of prayer taught by Jesus in the Gospels, Trump and many MAGA Christians promote public prayer as a way of manifesting their religious identity. Perhaps the most obvious example of promoting public prayer takes place at the annual “National Prayer Breakfast,” which has been held in Washington, DC, since the 1950s. The annual event is attended by the news media and is broadcast on national television.

One of the many recurring themes at the prayer breakfasts is the vital need to allow children to pray in public school, as if they are prohibited from doing so. In reality, children have a right to individual prayer in public schools. This form of individual prayer – apparently approved of by Jesus – has, however, been insufficient for the religious right that has long sought to promote school-sponsored prayers led by teachers, athletic coaches, or other school officials. Advocates of school-sponsored prayers have essentially argued that public school officials have a religious freedom right to lead children in prayer.

Other MAGA Christian objectives that have long been part of the agenda of the religious right include promoting official prayers not only in the U.S. Congress but also statehouses and local government meetings throughout the country. Trump frequently staged photo opportunities in the White House showing religious leaders praying for him.

Displays of religious symbols

Individuals and religious communities have a long-recognized constitutional right to display religious symbols in public. Churches may display crosses, Ten Commandments monuments, and Bibles. Individuals also have the constitu-

tional right to wear religious symbols on their clothing. Many MAGA Christians seek, however, not simply to exercise their right to display symbols individually and as religious communities, but also seek state support and financing for the display of religious symbols on public property. Since the 1950s, and continuing under the Trump administration, there have been efforts to promote governmental displays of Ten Commandments monuments, Christian crosses and crucifixes, and biblical passages. Trump wanted to use his power as president to pressure businesses to declare publicly “Merry Christmas,” regardless of the sentiments either of the businesses or of persons who would be offended by it. Perhaps the most salient display of a religious symbolism during his administration was on June 1, 2020, when Trump ordered the U.S. military to forcefully clear Lafayette Park of peaceful protestors so that he could have his photograph taken while holding a copy of the Bible in front of St. John’s Episcopal Church.¹⁴ As was the case during his campaign, Trump was more interested in holding the Bible aloft for photographers than reading or understanding it.

Support for the State of Israel

Since the 1960s, the Evangelical community has been strongly supportive of the State of Israel, regardless of Israeli foreign and domestic policy. Whereas Evangelicals have been critical of other foreign states that prohibit Christian missionary activity, they have not offered such criticisms of Israel for its prohibition on proselytism. The unwavering MAGA Christian support of Israel has little to do with actual Israeli policy, but reflects the eschatological belief that the establishment of the State of Israel is part of a biblical prophecy and will lead to the Second Coming of Christ. Evangelical Christians have long supported Israeli policy and have been among the principal proponents of acceding to the Israeli position that Jerusalem is the undivided capital of Israel and that foreign states should move their embassies to Jerusalem, even when it means placing embassies on Palestinian land in East Jerusalem. Although several prior candidates for president had pledged to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, Trump was the first actually to do so. On December 6, 2017, he issued a “Proclamation Recognizing Jerusalem as the Capital of the State of Israel

14 Bennett, Dalton/Cahlan, Sarah/Davis, Aaron C./Lee, Joyce Sohyun: “The crackdown before Trump’s photo op” (8 Jun. 2020), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2020/06/08/timeline-trump-church-photo-op/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

and Relocating the United States Embassy to Israel to Jerusalem.”¹⁵ Symbolizing the MAGA Christian support for this controversial political move, two of his well-known and controversial MAGA Christian supporters were invited to deliver public prayers inaugurating the newly opened embassy on May 14, 2018. According to *The New York Times* coverage of the event, a “Dallas evangelical pastor who once said that Jewish people are going to hell and a megachurch televangelist who claimed that Hitler was part of God’s plan to return Jews to Israel both played prominent roles on Monday in the opening ceremony of the new American Embassy in Jerusalem.”¹⁶

Attempt to ban Muslims from entering the United States

The MAGA movement is well known for its hostile rhetoric directed at Muslims, both those who are American citizens and those who live outside of the country. Equally sharp anti-Semitism was once pervasive among the Christian right, and now anti-Islam has become one of its new identifying characteristics. Whereas MAGA Christians support freedom of religion and non-discrimination for Christians, they have been much less supportive of religious freedom and non-discrimination regarding Muslims. Reflecting and promoting the bias against Muslims within the MAGA movement, candidate Trump repeatedly called for banning their entry into the United States. On January 27, 2017, within a week of his inauguration, President Trump issued Executive Order 13769, a provocative order designed to restrict Muslims from entering the United States. Entitled “Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States,”¹⁷ it did not use the words “Muslim” or “Islam” explicitly, but it identified several Muslim-majority countries in its ban and its intent was clear. While MAGA Christians supported the ban, public demonstrations against the EO 13769 broke out across the United States and it was challenged immediately in federal courts, where it was blocked from implementation. In response to the serious legal challenges against the order, Trump

15 82 Fed. Reg. (6 Dec. 2017), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2017-12-11/pdf/2017-26832.pdf>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023.

16 Haag, Matthew: “Robert Jeffress, Pastor Who Said Jews Are Going to Hell, Led Prayer at Jerusalem Embassy,” in: *The New York Times* (14 May 2018).

17 82 Fed. Reg. 8977 (1 Feb. 2017), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/02/01/2017-02281/protecting-the-nation-from-foreign-terrorist-entry-into-the-united-states>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023.

revised it twice in order to make its original bias less stark. The doubly revised and modified order was partially upheld by the Supreme Court.

Trump and the MAGA Christians proposed *exemptions from state laws* (on the basis of religious freedom) while simultaneously seeking *state endorsement of their beliefs*. Thus, they are instrumentalizing the *language* of religious freedom to promote their own freedom while at the same time limiting the freedoms of others.

Conclusion

The MAGA populist movement – which coalesced in 2016 – combined elements of several pre-existing populist themes, including resentment against social elites, a fear that freedoms are being lost (particularly religious freedom and the right to bear arms), a fear of immigrants and Muslims, antipathy towards gay marriage and LGBTQ rights, and opposition to abortion. Many within the MAGA movement were motivated by racist and anti-Semitic sentiments. Initially suspicious of Trump's morality and character, White Evangelical Christians ultimately became MAGA Christians, without whose support Trump would not have won the election.

While the language of religious freedom, Christian nationalism, and the Christian God were prevalent within MAGA populism, the specific religious goals were not the Gospel values of feeding the hungry, caring for widows, visiting those in prison, or loving one's neighbor, but rather promoting hostility towards disfavored groups, supporting Christian-identity symbols, increasing state financial aid for religion, and encouraging religious freedom exemptions for businesses from laws of general applicability. With the notable exception of claims about the right of community worship during the COVID pandemic, the claims for religious freedom from MAGA populism were less about seeking the right to practice one's religion, and more about symbols of religious identity, state financial support for religion, exemptions to laws prohibiting discrimination against gays, and prohibiting women from making their own decisions about the viability of their own pregnancies.

Societal Dynamics and Problematic Reactions towards Populist Appropriation

A Recipe for Political Polarization?

Tackling Distorted Views on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Heiner Bielefeldt

Introduction: Populist distortions of a human right

More than any other human right, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is at the center of political polarization.¹ In a number of countries – including Poland, Brazil, the U.S. and others – it is even a component within fully-fledged cultural wars. Conservatives from different religious backgrounds have invoked FoRB to oppose same-sex marriage, question specific parts of the mandatory school curriculum or back up restrictive anti-blasphemy laws. In turn, some liberals have criticized FoRB as an anachronism, that is a largely outdated historical right that has lost its legitimate role in modern secular societies. The fault lines may vary and shift back and forth in manifold ways: religious versus secular worldviews (or vice versa), tradition versus modernity (or the other way around), gender-related emancipation versus patriarchal structures and misogynic prejudices, Christian legacy versus “foreign invasion” (for example, by Muslim immigrants), or enlightenment versus obscurantism, to mention just a few random examples. What comes to the fore in all such configurations is the polemical pattern.

Prima facie, polarizing views on FoRB derive a certain degree of plausibility from a broad range of conflicts that have emerged around religious issues. While people from different religious backgrounds have brought their concerns to courts or other decision-making bodies, one should take note that this is part of “normal” human rights practice. No one should be surprised to

1 For a detailed analysis, see Bielefeldt, Heiner/Wiener, Michael: *Religious Freedom Under Scrutiny*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2020. This book (which is also available in German and Indonesian languages) contains many examples and references.

see FoRB – like any other human right – coming up in litigation. Additional complications may occur if conflicts take place in the intersection of different human rights issues. For example, FoRB-related interests can collide with issues of gender justice, just as freedom of speech can come into conflict with anti-racism agendas. Again, dealing with conflicts between different rights-based concerns has always been part of human rights practice, and it is certainly not an exclusive feature of FoRB. In such situations, the task is to find practical solutions that should do justice – to the maximum degree possible in the specific context – to all human rights-based concerns at stake. However, many polarizing invocations of FoRB are characterized by the absence of any interest in finding viable solutions by which to settle the issues. Instead, contextual conflicts (which can always emerge) are turned into *abstract dichotomies*. In fact, keeping the conflict alive appears to be a purpose in itself. The intended “solution” – if envisaged at all – can only be the total victory of one’s own position, according to the logic of “the winner takes it all.”

Such polarizing invocations typically ignore the nature of FoRB as an integral part of a broader human rights agenda.² Building on existing confusion concerning the content and purpose of FoRB, they exacerbate misperceptions or even promote deliberately distorted views. In extreme cases, this culminates in turning FoRB into a *bastion of anti-liberalism and anti-genderism*. Notwithstanding the fact that this human right carries “freedom” in its title, FoRB ironically seems to function as a sort of anti-liberal “counter-right” employed to disrupt emancipatory achievement in areas like school education, public health or gender justice. Whereas right-wing political movements frequently play the most active role in such projects of “weaponizing” FoRB for the purposes of cultural warfare, people from other parts of the political spectrum also contribute to obscuring the status and content of this human right. Rather than defending FoRB as an indispensable component within a holistic human rights agenda, commentators from the left or the liberal political spectrum often seem to treat FoRB with a certain degree of suspicion, thus inadvertently corroborating the distortions caused by right-wing populist movements.

In the face of misperceptions and distortions, this article aims to provide a conceptual clarification of FoRB. I first present FoRB as the human rights-

2 FoRB has been enshrined in numerous international human rights instruments, including the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 18) and the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (again article 18).

based approach to dealing with religious and belief-related diversity. Subsequently, I define some criteria on how to deal with conflicts between FoRB and other human rights, in particular rights concerning sexual orientation and gender identity. The article concludes with a short reflection on how to cope with illiberal uses of a liberal human right.

FoRB: The rights-based approach to dealing with religious diversity

Many misperceptions of FoRB rest on the assumption that it protects the authority of traditional religious views, norms or values. The fact that FoRB carries “religion” in its title may nourish expectations that it serves the purpose to strengthen the role of religion in general, including the values traditionally promoted by many religions. For example, people who fear for the future of traditional family structures in the face of new developments – like the recognition of same-sex marriage – often turn to FoRB as a potential defense strategy. Their aspiration may be to fortify the heteronormative family as a manifestation of FoRB. When it comes to countering provocative or satirical comments on religious norms, practices or authorities, FoRB again seems to offer a political response. Some even cite FoRB when arguing for restrictive anti-blasphemy laws.³ However, the underlying assumption that FoRB protects traditional religious beliefs or values is flawed. FoRB does not protect the integrity of belief systems or the societal status of traditional values, but instead consistently focuses on *human beings*. Like any other human right, FoRB protects *human beings* in their dignity, freedom and equality.⁴

True, FoRB specifically deals with concerns relating to religion or belief, and it is no coincidence that the letters “R” and “B” stand out in this acronym. Nonetheless, the point is that religions or beliefs only *indirectly* come into the focus of human rights, namely through claims brought forward by *human beings*. They are the right holders of FoRB, not religions or belief systems in themselves. The same is true for religious values: rather than backing up existing religious value systems, FoRB empowers human beings to hold, voice and stand

3 Over more than a decade, various UN forums discussed resolutions titled “Combating Defamation of Religions,” which factually supported blasphemy laws and other restrictive policies. The resolutions can easily be found on the internet.

4 See article 1, first sentence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which famously proclaims: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

up for their various religious or moral convictions, including in public political debates. In this case, again human beings are the ones receiving legal protection of their rights. The general purpose of FoRB is to guarantee respect and protection for human beings in the vast area of conscientious convictions, religious orientations, spiritual practices, theological or non-theological beliefs, religious rules and so on.

Why this strict focus on human beings? Does this not confirm the conservative diagnosis of a general decline of religion in public life? The opposite is true. Above all, taking religion seriously implies appreciating the *diversity* that we witness in the field. Indeed, “religion” only exists in the plural, namely as “religions.” Theological views substantially differ between and within religious traditions, and practical rules – from dietary stipulations or traditional clothing to initiation rituals or the celebration of religious holidays – differ even more. The *one common element* to be found in all of this is *human practice* in the broadest sense of the word. Obviously, human beings are the ones holding or challenging religious views, they are the ones interpreting and observing community-related religious rules, and they are the ones cherishing or abandoning religious practices and promoting or criticizing certain religious values. Keeping the focus of legal protection consistently on human beings rather than religions or beliefs themselves seems to be the only way of doing justice to the existing – and further emerging – diversity in the broad area of faith, belief and religiosity.

The clear focus on human beings as right holders thus accounts for the wide scope of FoRB. Qua its nature as a universal human right, FoRB cannot be confined to the orthodox followers of traditionally recognized “world religions.” Rather, it facilitates numerous manifestations of *inter-religious*, *intra-religious* and *post-religious* diversity. It protects promoters of feminist re-interpretation of religious sources no less than their conservative opponents. While certainly facilitating traditional religious practice, FoRB also opens the space for new religious movements or theological reforms. Generally speaking, FoRB covers people’s identity-shaping existential convictions and related practices in the broadest sense, including atheism and agnosticism.⁵ Whoever claims FoRB for their own – conservative, liberal, progressive, etc. – positions should be aware

5 In paragraph 2 of its General Comment no. 22 (of 1993), dedicated to clarifying the normative profile of FoRB, the UN Human Rights Committee has pointed out that “Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms ‘belief’ and ‘religion’ are to be broadly con-

that FoRB likewise protects the freedom of people holding other views or pursuing alternative agendas.

Against a widespread misperception, the clear focus on human beings as right holders is not tantamount to promoting an “individualistic” way of life, detached from societal expectations and communitarian demands. Although FoRB aims to protect individuals from coercion and undue pressure, it also covers numerous community-related features of religious life, such as religious socialization of children, community-based worship, fasting and breaking the fast together with others, carrying out pilgrimages and burying community members who have passed away. FoRB furthermore includes institutional preconditions of religious community life, like the establishment of religious schools and training institutions, the building and restoring of houses of worship or the running of cemeteries. Nonetheless, this does not alter the fact that the protection provided by FoRB is due to *human beings*, as individuals and together with others.

Another misunderstanding concerns the “anthropocentric” nature of human rights in general and FoRB in particular. While the consistent focus on human beings as right holders implies some sort of political and legal “anthropocentrism,” it would be incorrect to mix political concerns about the basic rights of human beings with a fully-fledged anthropocentric doctrine or ideology. Human rights do not presuppose the understanding that the human being constitutes “the center of all things.”⁶ In fact, FoRB opens a wide space for most different religious and non-religious worldviews, including theocentric, biocentric, cosmocentric and other *non-anthropocentric perspectives* and related practices. Nonetheless, even non-anthropocentric views are held and cherished by human beings, which is what matters for the practice of human rights.

The clear and consistent focus on human beings as right holders remains a decisive criterion by which to identify genuine FoRB claims from false or misleading invocations. Vague references to existing “religious interests,” “religious traditions” or “religious values” do not suffice to qualify political agendas as being in line with FoRB. Sometimes, the opposite is the case. For example, restrictive policies aimed at protecting a country’s religious status quo through anti-conversion laws are obviously incompatible with FoRB. The same

strued.” This important clarification has been regularly cited by other human rights bodies, including the UN Special Rapporteurs on FoRB.

6 A well-known proverb ascribed to the Ancient Greek sophist Protagoras.

is true for anti-blasphemy laws, which stifle public dissent or critique of religion, or laws designed to fortify collective observance of traditional religious values against public criticism and internal reform movements. Even when hijacking a superficial language of “religious freedom,” as it sometimes happens, such restrictive policies or laws turn the logic of FoRB upside down.

Owing to its nature as a human right, FoRB opens the space for manifestations of religious and belief-related *diversity*, often in conjunction with other forms of diversity. Of course, no one is compelled to like this. Exposure to diversity – whether in the field or religiosity or other areas – can be exhausting, and it is always a challenge. This experience has become the entry point for various populist movements and their vague promises to “clean up” the messiness of modern life. However, policies of promoting ethnic, cultural or religious homogeneity by stoking resentments against minorities or immigrants can certainly not be in the interest of FoRB.

How to assess conflicts between FoRB and other human rights

The understanding that FoRB always focuses on human beings also changes the perception of many of the conflicts that occur around religious issues. In some cases, an adequate contextual analysis may reveal that a particular conflict involving religious beliefs or values actually lacks any genuine FoRB dimension. Indeed, many of the cases presented under the auspices of FoRB rest on fundamental misunderstandings; for example, people who feel offended by the sheer fact that their country recognizes same-sex marriages cannot legitimately claim a violation of their FoRB. In a religiously pluralistic society, no one is entitled to expect that others cherish and observe the same values as they themselves do. Persons with a conservative mindset concerning gender issues are certainly free to voice their reluctance, criticize the societal development and promote their own skeptical views: this is part of their freedom of expression and – if based on religious convictions – their freedom of religion,⁷

7 I cannot discuss here the issue of limitations on FoRB or freedom of expression, which the state can impose in the interest of preventing incitement to acts of hatred. Any limitations deemed necessary require a detailed justification in conformity with the criteria defined for that purpose. They are inter alia contained in article 18, paragraph 3 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

although they cannot impose their value systems on others. This example illustrates that not every rhetorical invocation of FoRB has a solid normative basis. Whether or not a specific conflict with religious overtones contains a genuine FoRB dimension always requires a diligent contextual analysis.⁸

Nonetheless, conflicts between FoRB and other human rights concerns can actually occur. Examples include the refusal of parents to have their children participate in sex-education, even though this is part of the mandatory school curriculum, or parental opposition against co-education of girls and boys, in particular in sports and swimming classes. Hotel owners refusing to host gay couples or bakers who do not wish to prepare a wedding cake for homosexuals have justified their position by pointing to their religious convictions, thus claiming recognition of their interests under FoRB. Registrars not wishing to become professionally involved with same-sex marriage ceremonies have invoked conscientious objection on religious grounds. Pharmacists who refuse to sell contraceptives have likewise referred to FoRB. One could easily prolong the list of examples of conflicts in the intersection of FoRB and gender justice. Given the high degree of public attention attributed to such issues, the conflict configuration of “FoRB versus gender” has meanwhile become a litmus test for the possibility of reconciling different human rights concerns in general.

How should one cope with this kind of conflict? It is impossible to provide a comprehensive general answer, because adequate judicial decisions will always be contextual. There is no “one-size-fits-all” solution. The task is to do justice – to the maximum degree possible⁹ – to all genuine human rights concerns at stake in the specific context. This precludes constructing abstract hierarchies, according to which one right would generally “trump” the conflicting right. Neither can the invocation of FoRB push aside rights claims relating to gender justice, nor can the interest in promoting more gender justice justify the neglect of FoRB. All of the human rights-based concerns involved in a particular conflict must be taken seriously. Ultimately, it may be inevitable to take a decision that prioritizes one rights-based concern over the other, although

8 It should be noted in passing that conflicts presented under the auspices of FoRB also warrant a diligent empirical analysis, not only a normative assessment. For example, assumptions that wearing the Islamic hijab indicates an inferior position of women incompatible with gender equality have often proven empirically wrong.

9 This caveat is important. Human rights are based on the insight that we obviously live in a non-ideal world.

it is important not to turn such *contextual priorities* into *abstract dichotomies* or a general ranking of rights.

While the idea of one right generally “trumping” another right is obviously incompatible with elevated normative status of *all* human rights, it also seems flawed to search for a lukewarm compromise somewhere in the “middle ground” between the (seemingly) conflicting rights. A vague 50/50 compromise would be no less problematic than the logic of “winner takes it all.” In order to move beyond those two problematic lines of thinking, one has to challenge a metaphor that regularly emerges in discussions on the adequate treatment of conflicting rights-based concerns, namely that of “balancing.” Many people seem to like “balancing,” since it stands for a nuanced and complex perspective, which may account for the extraordinary popularity of the term. However, the underlying picture of the two weighing scales is misleading,¹⁰ as it suggests a zero-sum conflict in which the two scales necessarily move in opposite directions: whenever one scale goes down, the other one will inevitably move up, and vice versa. In other words, gains on the one side will always be linked to losses on the other side, or at least this what the picture suggests. Applying this zero-sum logic to different human rights issues discourages the search for holistic solutions, thus reflecting the problem. For example, it may nourish the assumption that any progress concerning gender justice necessarily threatens the status of FoRB and that any additional emphasis placed on FoRB necessarily reduces the weight accorded to gender-related rights.

In the interest of a holistic human rights approach, it seems imperative to overcome this kind of zero-sum logic suggested by the metaphor of the weighing scales. Without downplaying contextual contestation between FoRB issues and LGBTIQ+ rights, it is actually quite possible to simultaneously promote both human rights. Working for both human rights is certainly not schizophrenic. When understood as universal right owned by human beings, FoRB does not constitute a general obstacle to the implementation of gender-related rights, nor does progress in the area of gender justice in any way diminish the significance of FoRB. Pursuing a holistic human rights agenda proves particularly important in view of the many millions of people worldwide who live in circumstances where they would actually need *both*

10 For a detailed analysis, see Bielefeldt, Heiner: “Limiting Permissible Limitations. How to Preserve the Substance of Religious Freedom,” in: *Religion and Human Rights* 15 (1–2/2020), pp. 3–19.

respect for their freely articulated religious identities in accordance with their religious self-understandings as well as the freedom to live in harmony with their sexual orientations or gender identities. Dichotomized constructions of the relationship between FoRB and gender justice would tear those people's life world apart and rob them of a much-needed source of hope.

One should bear in mind that the invocation of FoRB is not a privilege for conservative religious believers. As previously mentioned, FoRB facilitates a broad range of different uses. Just as it functions as a reference for conservative followers of religious traditions, it can also empower people with liberal views or progressive religious aspirations. As a human right that generally promotes diversity not only between but also *within* religious communities, FoRB can indirectly¹¹ contribute to broadening the space for religious reform agendas, not least for projects that try to reconcile religious traditions with modern aspirations of gender justice. The way in which FoRB comes to the fore ultimately depends on the right holders themselves, who have to decide on whether and how to make use of their human rights, including their right to FoRB.

Coping with illiberal uses of a liberal right

FoRB is a liberal right that explicitly proclaims “freedom” in its title. In this regard, it displays structural similarities with the freedom of expression, freedom of assembly or freedom of association, to name just a few examples. However, liberal rights are not rights for liberals only, just as human rights in general cannot remain reserved for the friends of Amnesty International or other human rights organizations. Due to their universalistic aspiration, human rights belong to *all humans equally*, regardless of whether a person's attitude is liberal or less liberal, ultra-liberal or even openly anti-liberal. Rights-based diversity even includes those who do not appreciate such diversity and would prefer living in a much more homogeneous religious, cultural or political environment.

Leaders, followers and supporters of populist movements also enjoy their human rights, as individuals and together with others. They are free to express

11 Highlighting this “indirectness” seems important to avoid a possible misunderstanding. Just as FoRB does not protect traditional religious values, it does not promote liberal or progressive religious agendas in themselves. In any case, the appreciation of diversity does promote openness for internal discussions and reform projects.

their positions, except when openly inciting to acts of hatred. They can hold public demonstrations, establish political parties and participate in national elections. People are also free to propose their own idiosyncratic re-conceptualizations of human rights, including strange, problematic and dangerously misleading interpretations of FoRB, which actually happens quite frequently.

However, it is one thing to use a right to freedom for voicing conservative or ultra-conservative positions, including skepticism concerning gender-related emancipation. This happens not only in the name of FoRB but also in relation to other human rights, like the freedom of expression, freedom of association or freedom of assembly. Twisting one specific human right into a bastion of anti-liberalism or anti-genderism – as it happens with FoRB – is something else. Beyond obscuring the human rights nature of FoRB, such ideological constructions are an attack on the indivisibility of all human rights in general. As prohibition cannot be a solution, it seems all the more important to expose flagrant misunderstandings and ideological distortions of FoRB to public criticism. This cannot be an exclusive task for experts; rather, what is required to counter the simplistic and polarizing slogans of populist movements is the commitment of many people who take an active ownership in human rights. Working for a clear understanding of the normative contours and purpose of FoRB is an integral part of such much-needed political commitment against populism.

Religious Freedom in the Field of Tension between Populist Anti-Muslim Sentiments and Islamist Radicalisation Tendencies

Sociological Observations Using the Case of Germany

Youssef Dennaoui

Introduction

Sociological research on Islam offers an important conceptual tool for examining the genesis and inner dynamics of the religious field of Islam as a self-organised minority religion in the context of German society, without losing sight of the religious conflicts and disputes that arise from it, including religious self-organisation conflicts, social integration conflicts, legal institutionalisation conflicts, etc.¹ Islamophobic tendencies are also just as much a part of a well-founded sociological description of the conflicts and debates surrounding Islam and Muslims as the legal possibilities of institutionalising Islam according to religious law standards in Germany, at the centre of which is the fundamental right to freedom of religion. It is therefore unsurprising if “legal disputes about religious freedom and thus about human rights have become an important part of the institutionalisation process of Islam in Europe.”²

While these dynamics of religious self-organisation and the legal and institutional integration of Islam in Germany have brought about legal and religious emancipation opportunities for Muslims, they have been accompanied by side-effects and conflicts, which are evident in increasing populist and far-

1 Wohlrab-Sahr, Monika/Tezcan, Levent: “Einleitung,” in: Monika Wolhrab Sahr/Levent Tezcan (eds.), *Islam in Europa. Institutionalisierung und Konflikt*, Baden-Baden: Nomos 2022, pp. 7–23.

2 Wohlrab-Sahr: *Einleitung*, p. 17. Quotes that have not been published in English have been translated into English by the editors of this book.

right Islamophobia in German society³ and visible in the strengthening of Islamist forces. Recent sociological research shows how both developments are in a spiralling relationship with each other, which drives and legitimises radicalism and resentment on both sides.⁴ While the former are afraid of “Islam”⁵ and equate it with Islamism, their opponents from the Islamist spectrum fear for “Islam,” which is understood and practised here in a fundamentalist sense.⁶ The human right to religious freedom is instrumentalised by both extremes and accordingly appears as the object of different and contradictory interpretations and appropriations.

In this article, in a first step I will briefly outline the genesis and institutionalisation of the religious field of Islam in Germany. In a second step, I will show why the discussion about the equal treatment of Islam in Germany can sociologically only be described in fields of tension between increasing social Islamophobia and Islamist radicalism, whereby the right to religious freedom appears to be contested within society. In a third step, I will use the example of the mosque building debates in Germany to demonstrate how moderate

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- 3 Bielefeldt, Heiner: *Das Islambild in Deutschland. Zum öffentlichen Umgang mit der Angst vor dem Islam*, Berlin: Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte 2007; Benz, Wolfgang: *Die Feinde aus dem Morgenland. Wie die Angst vor den Muslimen unsere Demokratie gefährdet*, München: Beck 2012; Pollack, Detlef: “Öffentliche Wahrnehmung des Islam in Deutschland,” in: Dirk Halm/Hendrik Meyer (eds.), *Islam und die deutsche Gesellschaft*, Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden 2013, pp. 89–118; Pickel, Gert: “Religion als Ressource für Rechtspopulismus? Zwischen Wahlverwandtschaften und Fremdzuschreibungen,” in: *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 2 (2/2018), pp. 277–312; Pickel, Gert: *Weltanschauliche Vielfalt und Demokratie. Wie sich religiöse Vielfalt auf die Demokratie auswirkt*, Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung 2019; Hafez, Kai/Schmidt, Sabrina: *Die Wahrnehmung des Islam in Deutschland*, Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung 2015; Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat (BMI): *Muslimfeindlichkeit – Eine deutsche Bilanz*. Berlin: BMI 2023.
 - 4 Pickel, Gert/Öztürk, Cemal: “Die Bedeutung antimuslimischer Ressentiments für die Erfolge des Rechtspopulismus in Europa – Konzeptuelle Überlegungen und empirische Befunde,” in: Monika Wolhrab Sahr/Levent Tezcan (eds.), *Islam in Europa. Institutionalisierung und Konflikt*, Baden-Baden: Nomos 2022, pp. 303–355; Pickel, Gert/Pickel, Susanne: “Elemente und Rahmenbedingungen der (Co-)Radikalisierung. Erste Analysen und Erkundungen des Forschungsfeldes,” in: *Hikma* 14 (1/2023), pp. 31–53.
 - 5 Bielefeldt: *Islambild*; Benz: *Feinde*.
 - 6 Dennaoui, Youssef: “Reflexiver Islam: Islamsoziologie als Kosmopolitisierungsforschung,” in: Ulrich Becks/Oliver Römer/Clemens Boehncke/Markus Holzinger (eds.), *Soziologische Phantasie und kosmopolitisches Gemeinwesen: Perspektiven einer Weiterführung der Soziologie*, Baden-Baden: Nomos 2020, pp. 239–271.

forces among Muslims and non-Muslims alike are among the major losers in this form of populist and radical Islamist instrumentalisation of religious freedom. In the concluding part of the article, perspectives are briefly outlined on how religious freedom and its significance for society as a whole can be redefined for all and across all religious contexts.

Religious institutionalisation of Islam in Germany: Internal dynamics and external factors

Religious conflicts and disputes about Islam can be divided into those that arise from the logic and dynamics of internal religious differences and disagreements among Muslims, and those that relate to the social environment of the Islamic field (social and constitutional framework, social integration and institutionalisation processes, etc.). For an understanding of the former, the aspect of Islam's self-organisation among Muslims must be given greater consideration. Self-organisation refers to processes of religious self-sufficiency that significantly shape the formation of a religious field of Islam in Germany. By contrast, external general conditions refer to religious constitutional and institutional requirements, at the centre of which is the freedom of religion as a fundamental right.

While in the 1980s conservative religiously-oriented Muslims (mostly lay people) were significantly involved in building the first mosques to meet the growing need for religious places of communal faith practice on the part of the growing number of Muslims (family reunifications of the first generation of immigrants), these first religious structures were taken over by Islamic (self-)organisations (mostly from the respective countries of origin) from the 1990s onwards, largely partially professionalised (sending imams and preachers, etc.) and successively expanded in their competences. In a further phase, this led to the established organisations seeking the cooperation and support of the state. This enabled new areas of Muslims' lives to be served religiously and new needs to be awakened (charitable institutions, cemeteries, Islamic instruction in public schools, etc.).⁷ In this way, professional actors who represented the interests of Muslims in society more or less successfully established

7 Ceylan, Rauf: "Orthodoxe versus heterodoxe Gemeinden. Machtaufbau und Machtverlust der etablierten Gemeinden," in: Lamy Kaddor (ed.), *Muslimisch und liberal. Was einen zeitgemäßen Islam ausmacht*, München: Piper 2020, p. 164.

themselves. These established actors are characterised by two features: first, the orientation of their activities towards the possibilities that the German constitutional law on religion offers to religious communities, and second, the orientation towards established religious – usually Christian – institutions and their religious-political actions. Interest in the religious and religious-political institutionalisation possibilities offered by religious law has grown over time. Even though many Islamic organisations to date have been denied legal recognition as *corporations under public law*, they continue to show a stable willingness to pursue their self-defined religious interests and needs in this direction. Already at this point, it becomes apparent how the religious field of Islam – including the organisations that claim a substitute entitlement – is determined by religious constitutional requirements, which in turn find their first justification in the fundamental right to freedom of religion. Here, no less is at issue than the question of what Islam is and how it can be appropriately practised and organised under the conditions of a modern secular society without “the bureaucratized corset of the semi-state religious organisation being imposed on it.”⁸

While the first small backyard mosques were hardly noticed in the 1970s and 1980s, over time they have become a public issue and the subject of social debate. The more expressive or larger that the mosques became, the greater the conflicts and the more heated the debates about them in the media and public. In this respect, Thomas Schmitt can be agreed with when he writes:

“The most violent conflicts occur [...] precisely over visible architecture that can be identified as Islamic (or the audible call of the muezzin). These are always also symbolic conflicts that have an ‘added value’ compared to the limited cause of the conflict. They are symbolic and symptomatic conflicts around the integration of migrants and the position of Islam in Germany.”⁹

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- 8 Ulrich Beck says here that the legal equality of Islam with the other – above all Christian – religious communities in Germany and Europe can lead to a kind of “organisational assimilation,” since it must treat Islam according to the standards and rules of religious constitutional law without taking into account its own religious constitutionality: Beck, Ulrich: *Der eigene Gott. Von der Friedensfähigkeit und dem Gewaltpotential der Religionen*, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Weltreligionen 2008, pp. 198 ff.; in detail Dennaoui: *Reflexiver Islam*, p. 256.
- 9 Schmitt, Thomas: “Moschee-Konflikte und deutsche Gesellschaft,” in: Dirk Halm/Hendrik Meyer (eds.), *Islam und die deutsche Gesellschaft*, Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden 2013, pp. 145–166.

Mosques can thus be understood as symbols of the increasing religious presence of Muslims in an environment influenced by Christianity. The larger the mosques, the larger and more violent the conflicts that arise. This situation is currently accompanied not only by tense challenges for German society but also by repercussions for Muslim life environments, traditions and organisational forms of the religious, and ultimately leads to debates about Islam and Muslims in Germany increasingly revolving around the political question of whether certain religious practices and spaces can still be placed under the protection of the fundamental right to freedom of religion. This politicisation of the debate has led to a radicalisation of positions in different directions: while right-wing extremist groups in Germany equate Islam with Islamism (for example Islam as a political ideology) to denigrate Muslims and discriminate against them under religious law, radical Islamist groups instrumentalise the increasing Islamophobia and Muslimophobia in the country and exert pressure on moderate Muslims who act as cooperation partners of the state in many religious policy projects, such as the German Islam Conference (*Deutsche Islam Konferenz*, DIK), which has been held regularly since 2006.

Equal legal treatment of Islam in Germany in the field of tension between social Islamophobia and Islamist radicalisation tendencies

The right to religious freedom is a human right anchored in both the international and the European human rights system. In the German Basic Law, it is enshrined in Article 4 as a fundamental pillar of freedom. It is about the freedom that – according to Heiner Bielefeldt – “opens up the space for the articulation of religious or ideological convictions, interests, needs and practices. This is not only about questions of inner faith, but also about shaping one’s life in accordance with religious or ideological postulates. Moreover, religious freedom is not limited to strengthening the position of the individual, but equally includes communal and infrastructural dimensions of religious practice.”¹⁰ Freedom of religion is thus protected by the state, which – under the conditions of modern secular societies – has the task of legally guaranteeing freedom of religion for everyone and enabling it in terms of religious policy, without privileging a particular religion or even identifying with it and

10 Bielefeldt, Heiner/Wiener, Michael: Religionsfreiheit auf dem Prüfstand. Konturen eines umkämpften Menschenrechts, Bielefeld: transcript 2020, p. 12.

thus undermining the state's neutrality requirement in religious-ideological matters and indirectly calling into question the secularity of the constitutional state.¹¹

Within Islam, Muslims refer differently to religious freedom, with different intentions and expectations. Self-organised Muslims – religious as well as non-religious – are open to different degrees to the possibilities that the constitutional law on religion offers to everyone. When Muslims articulate themselves differently under the umbrella of religious freedom and make different demands on the state regarding the practical exercise of this right, these articulations and demands are increasingly perceived negatively within society, and beyond the boundaries of religious communities.¹²

The negative perception of Islam in Germany in its interaction with the state triggers paradoxical effects both in society as a whole and among Muslims, in which prejudices about Muslims¹³ and Islamophobic attitudes and misunderstandings – especially in Islamist circles – about the meaning of the right to religious freedom play a central role. The prejudices in society as a whole are not justified or well-founded criticism of Islam as a religion, which incidentally also exists, but are false generalisations (all Muslims are Islamists, radical, misogynistic, prone to violence, intolerant, etc.). The social dissemination of a negative image of Islam – which for example equates Islam with Islamism – has the effect of creating an environment of culturally accepted inequality in which it becomes possible to devalue Muslims religiously and socially to then exclude them from the right to religious freedom.

Moreover, the equation of “Islam” and “Islamism” serves not only as a demarcation mark but also as a mobilisation strategy for the long-term establishment of an Islamophobic consensus that can be resorted to – depending on the political situation – to articulate one's own problems and fears in a populist manner and mark “scapegoats.” In this respect, it is only logical that “right-wing populist parties that are spreading throughout Europe [...] have quickly recognised the potential of ‘Islam as a bogeyman.’”¹⁴ It even takes on “a central

11 Bielefeldt, Heiner: *Muslime im säkularen Rechtsstaat. Integrationschancen durch Religionsfreiheit*, Bielefeld: transcript 2003; Bielefeldt: *Religionsfreiheit*.

12 Hafez: *Wahrnehmung*; Pickel: *Weltanschauliche Vielfalt*.

13 Zick, Andreas: “Das Vorurteil über Muslime,” in: Peter Antes/Rauf Ceylan, *Muslime in Deutschland. Historische Bestandsaufnahme, aktuelle Entwicklungen und zukünftige Forschungsfragen*, Wiesbaden: Springer VS Wiesbaden 2017.

14 Hafez, Kai: *Freiheit, Gleichheit und Intoleranz. Der Islam in der liberalen Gesellschaft Deutschlands und Europas*, Bielefeld: transcript 2014, p. 8.

political function”¹⁵ and thus encodes an anti-modern and anti-democratic attitude of denial aimed at questioning equality and freedom rights for Muslims. By equating Islam and Islamism, Muslims are placed under general suspicion and countered by mistrust and fear, as recent studies clearly show.¹⁶

Paradoxically, the main beneficiaries of this development in the field of Islam are radical forces from the Islamist and Salafist spectrum. Through the populist equation of Islam and Islamism, Islamist forces are moved to the centre of the field of Islam and being presented in the media and politically as “Islam.” It is very important to mention this aspect here to understand how processes of populist equation of Islam and Islamism work and how Islamists benefit from it. Radical Islamist and radical Salafist forces skilfully use prejudice and discrimination against Muslims to propagate their version of a threatened Islam in Germany, recruit new followers and thus place pressure on moderate Islamic associations, which they accuse of cooperating politically and legally with the German state to distort “Islam.” In doing so, they polemicise in a conspiracy-theory manner against all those who represent a different understanding of Islam: against state institutions and media, Muslim associations and liberal Muslims, whom they derogatorily call “modernists” and accuse of *takfir* (unbelief). Especially Salafist – mostly self-proclaimed – preachers and spokespersons have gained massive power within

15 Decker, Oliver/Brähler, Elmar: *Autoritäre Dynamiken. Alte Ressentiments – neue Radikalität / Leipziger Autoritarismus Studie 2020*, Gießen: Psychosozial Verlag: 2021, p. 25.

16 In the Bertelsmann Foundation's *Religionsmonitor*, Gert Pickel even states that a “negative perception of Islam” (Pickel: *Weltanschauliche Vielfalt*, p. 12) has solidified and stabilised at a high level. The *Authoritarianism Study 2020* of the University of Leipzig goes in a similar direction, and in addition to the solidification of old resentments and the emergence of new forms of far-right radicalism in the middle of society, it states high stable values for Muslim hostility, which is “strongly pronounced and also significantly higher in the East than in the West in 2020” (Decker: *Autoritäre Dynamiken*, p. 64). For the German context, the report of the Independent Expert Group on Muslimophobia commissioned by the Federal Ministry of the Interior has recently expanded the empirical research on this development to include further data from police crime statistics as well as anti-discrimination agencies and counselling organisations, and has highlighted the extent of anti-Muslim reservations and incidents as well as their different manifestations and the consolidation of Islamophobic prejudices in the middle of society as a real social fact (BMI: *Muslimfeindlichkeit*, p. 8).

the Islamic field in recent years.¹⁷ Their conspiracy-theoretical and polemical discourse goes as far as to cleverly portray all processes of institutionalisation of Islam in Germany as attempts to “tame” Islam. They see in the right to religious freedom above all the right that guarantees them the freedom to pursue their religious-radical mission. In doing so, radical Islamic forces position themselves not only against other Muslims and Islamic organisations within Islam but also against other non-Muslim groups, social institutions and like-minded people from the right-wing populist spectrum.

Through the right-wing extremist appropriation of Islamic issues, corresponding actors prove to be further profiteers of debates on Islam, especially in times of crisis. For example, simply drawing attention to Islam now provides the AfD in Germany with the necessary political leeway to put its radical agenda centre stage and place other parties under pressure. Although it professes “unrestricted freedom of faith, conscience and confession in accordance with Article 4 of the Basic Law”¹⁸ in its political manifesto, the AfD polemicalises in a sweeping manner against everything that is important for the religious life of Muslims in Germany: the building of mosques and minarets, Islamic instruction in schools, theological Islamic centres, etc. Using questionable objections and populist themes, they pursue a strategy that amounts to the de facto abolition of the human right to religious freedom for large sections of Muslims. The protests, citizens’ petitions and initiatives initiated by the AfD throughout Germany in the last ten years should also be seen in this context. They are primarily concerned with using certain occasions to scandalise and thus negatively portray Islam in the media as Islamist, radical, foreign, misogynistic, anti-Semitic, etc. and portray the established parties as incapable of countering the increasing Islamisation of the country and presenting themselves as the saviours of the “Christian Occident” without themselves being religious in the Christian sense.

17 Dennaoui, Youssef: “Religiöse Überbietung: Dimensionen und Folgen einer Sonderform religiöser Konkurrenz im Feld des Islam in Deutschland am Beispiel des Neosalafismus,” in: Paula-Irene Villa-Braslavsky (ed.), *Polarisierte Welten. Verhandlungen des 41. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie in Bielefeld 2022*.

18 Alternative für Deutschland (AfD): Deutschland. Aber normal. Programm der Alternative für Deutschland für die Wahl zum 20. Deutschen Bundestag, p. 84, https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/20210611_AfD_Programm_2021.pdf, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

Religious freedom in the context of debates on the building of mosques, minarets and muezzin calls in Germany

Like all human rights, freedom of religion or belief must prove itself in the concrete conditions and constraints on the ground. In Germany, every application for a building permit for a mosque or an application for a muezzin call has to reckon with the fact that decisions are made not only based on construction law but also how strongly right-wing extremist parties are represented locally and how well they are organised, as the disputes in recent years over the DITIB (Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs) mosque in Cologne have clearly shown. The right-wing extremist movements and parties have succeeded in shifting the debate about the building of the mosque and later about the muezzin call into a debate about the influence of political Islam in Germany and organising broad alliances for this. They argue that the muezzin call does not fall under the protection of the right to religious freedom and should be seen as a symbol of an increasing politicisation of Islam in Germany. This is an attempt to relativise the fundamental right to freedom of religion on the grounds that this is not a religion but a political ideology that seeks to mark its sphere of influence and impact through further visible (mosque, minaret) and audible (muezzin call over loudspeaker) signs of power. Indeed, it is only along these and similar lines of argumentation that the AfD can write sentences in its most recent political manifesto such as: “Minarets and the call of the muezzin are not compatible with a tolerant coexistence of religions as practised by the Christian churches.”¹⁹ In this way, it places other parties and religious organisations under pressure and can present itself to its supporters as a bulwark against “political Islam” and as a protector of “Christian religious traditions.”

With this strategy, the AfD succeeds in placing pressure on and dividing established politics. While some politicians – across all party lines – are publicly advocating the unrestricted validity of the right to religious freedom for Muslims, others are calling on Muslims for restraint in building mosques or minarets, yet others position themselves similarly to the AfD, adopting or even anticipating its slogans such as “Islam does not belong to Germany,” as the then Interior Minister Horst Seehofer did when he took office in 2018, thereby politicising the issue of Islam in his own way and not only taking a stand against the AfD but also attempting to position himself against the

19 AfD: Deutschland, p. 86.

then Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel in order to make her appear “Islam-friendly” in the political contest.

Conclusion

This article was not about constitutional law on religion in the context of discussions about religious freedom and Islam in Germany but the sociological observation of how the right to religious freedom is instrumentalised or misunderstood by populist forces – right-wing extremists as well as Islamists – and thus comes under strong right-wing extremist and religious-radical pressure. The clash between right-wing populist discourses of Islamophobia and Muslimophobia and the attractiveness of radical Salafist groups (especially for young people) ultimately leads to the actors involved legitimising and empowering each other through ideologically pejorative attributions. We are dealing here with dynamic and reflexive stabilisation processes²⁰ that cannot be understood in isolation from each other and that lead to different understandings of human rights in general and the right to religious freedom in particular. While right-wing populist groups want to cut off the religious constitutional rights of Muslims as religious communities because they see “Islami-sation” by Muslims at work,²¹ radical Islamist forces evaluate efforts to institutionalise Islam in German society as a “deformation” of Islam and inadmissible assimilation to Christian institutions, which in their eyes must be rejected and fought with all means. In this way, the extreme poles (right-wing extremists, Islamists) succeed in placing the moderates and those willing to compromise in both camps under pressure, with fatal consequences for Muslims as well as society as a whole.

From this perspective, the article has taken up in particular the conflict-ridden debates about mosque construction and the calling of the muezzin in Germany to show how different instrumentalisations of the fundamental right to freedom of religion decisively shape the debate about Islam in German society and contribute to the fact that increasingly more Germans perceive Islam as foreign or even threatening.

How, in view of this situation, the fundamental right to freedom of religion can develop its overall social significance and validity for all and across all re-

20 Dennaoui: Reflexiver Islam.

21 AfD: Deutschland: p. 14.

ligious contexts within the framework of a “coherent and systematic religious policy”²² appears as a task for state religious policy and the religious communities alike. Cooperative institutionalisation processes of Islam (construction of representative mosques, Islamic instruction in schools, Islamic theological centres, etc.) – which are covered and supported by the right to religious freedom – are inconceivable without committed and equal cooperation partners on both the state and Muslim sides. The further development and strengthening of democratic institutions in Germany depends to a strong extent on the place that Islam in its diversity occupies in them.

22 BMI: Muslimfeindlichkeit.

Secularism in France and the Challenge of Populism

Valentine Zuber

Religious freedom in France is rooted in a long and tumultuous history. First proclaimed in Article X of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789 (“No one shall be disturbed on account of his opinions, even of a religious nature, provided that their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law”), freedom of conscience and worship for all was reinforced by the gradual secularisation of the state during the 19th and 20th centuries.¹ The first article of the 1905 law on the separation of church and state proclaims that “the Republic ensures freedom of conscience. It guarantees the free exercise of worship”. Finally, the current constitution of the Fifth Republic (1958) describes the latter as a “secular republic” and specifies in its Article 1 that it “respects all beliefs”.²

From a legal and constitutional perspective, the defence of freedom of religion or belief in France follows the overarching criteria defined internationally by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights in its Article 18: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change one’s religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest one’s religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” It is expressed by the privileged term *laïcité* (or secularism) of the state.³ For several years, the very

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- 1 Picq, Jean: *La liberté de religion dans la République: L’esprit de laïcité*, Paris: Odile Jacob 2014.
 - 2 Calvès, Gwénaële: *La laïcité*, Paris: La Découverte 2022.
 - 3 Zuber, Valentine: “Laizität – eine französische Ausnahme? Zum Verhältnis von Staat und Religion,” in: Corine Defrance/Ulrich Pfeil (eds.), *Länderbericht Frankreich*, Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2021, pp. 409–419.

principle and definition of secularism have been fiercely debated in French society, and they regularly reappear in the political and media debate on the integration of foreign populations of Muslim culture or religion. Secularism – an achievement of republican programmes and of the left since the 19th century – is now claimed by the populist right, including the extreme right. From being a principle of equality and fairness in the treatment by the state of all its citizens regardless of their religious affiliation, for some secularism has become a solution for the exclusion of an exogenous religion considered as a threat to French identity. The “new secularism” (“nouvelle laïcité”⁴) appeared at the turn of the millennium and was gradually clarified by new laws on the control of religion. However, is this new secularism threatening the universal guarantee of fundamental freedoms necessary for perpetuating a genuine state governed by law by turning a legal principle of regulating pluralism into a means of state control of religion?

The eventful history of the establishment of the freedom of religion or belief in France

The process of secularisation in France has been long and conflictual, proceeding for several centuries before taking the form that we know today. Far from being uniform, it has gone through all sorts of stages, made up of comings and goings, modifications and historical and geographical exceptions. Indeed, its history – which began with the introduction of the Reformation in France – is not yet complete. This process has seen a succession of different political and conceptual models, albeit in which one could already detect sketches of the different secular principles that currently characterise French secularism. Several regimes for the management of religion by politics have thus succeeded one another in the course of modern French history: a model of religious co-existence with the Edict of Nantes of 1598 granted by King Henry IV, which allowed French Protestants – in well-defined areas – to benefit from civil and political recognition until King Louis XIV withdrew it from them in 1685 with the Edict of Fontainebleau revoking the previous Edict; a model of civil tolerance with the granting in extremis by King Louis XVI in 1787 of a civil status issued by the king’s officials to Protestants who had previously been hunted

4 Hennette-Vauchez, Stéphanie/Valentin, Vincent: *L’Affaire Baby Loup ou la Nouvelle Laïcité*, Paris: Lextenso éditions 2014.

down and had no civil status; a model of religious pluralism regulated by state control with the proclamation of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1791, which made clerics paid by the state into civil servants who had to swear an oath of loyalty; the first separatist model with the decree of 3 Ventôse Year III (1795), which established the separation of the Catholic Church and the State and the end of subsidies for religions following the failure of the constitutional church; and the recognition model with the system known as “recognised religions,” which combined the signing of a concordat with the Pope in 1801 with the organic articles regulating the police of Catholic and Protestant religions (1802). Issued unilaterally by the state, the latter granted subsidies to the various religions represented on the territory – Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism and, a few years later, a non-Christian religion, Judaism – under the condition of reinforced and tactful control. This conventional regime was exceptionally long-lived (just over a century of operation) and survived all of the political upheavals that have marked French history except for the last one, the republican regime of the Third Republic, which marked its end with the law of separation of Church and State of 9 December 1905. However, it persists in three French departments – Haut- and Bas-Rhin and Moselle – for essentially historical reasons.

The separatist model of 1905 pronounced the divorce (without mutual consent) of the State and the cults and put an end to the public service of the cults and the state subsidy of the latter. Religious institutions were henceforth governed solely by private law and their legal organisation involved the creation of religious associations, which were somewhat different from the general associations governed by the 1901 law. Although they are more difficult to set up than the former, they benefit from some tax advantages. Moreover, religious associations must be chaired by an elected member and their executive bodies must meet the requirements of a democratic body. This is the legal model governing the majority of French religious denominations (even the Catholic denomination, for which the religious associations initially rejected by its authorities were converted into diocesan associations directly headed by the bishop).

Although the regime resulting from the 1905 Act was applied to several French overseas departments such as Reunion Island, Guadeloupe and Martinique (from 1911), other French territories remain subject to older legislation. This is the case in the department of Guyana, where – by virtue of a royal decree dating from the reign of Charles X (1828) – the only religion recognised is Catholicism. Its clerics (bishops and priests) are employees of the General Council of French Guyana and have the status of civil servants. The other

religions and all those present in the other overseas territories are governed by decree-laws dating from 1939 (known as the Mandel decrees), whether in the overseas collectivities (such as French Polynesia, Wallis and Futuna, Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, French Southern and Antarctic Territories), but also in the collectivity – with a special status of autonomy – of New Caledonia and even in Mayotte, whose elevation to the status of department on 31 March 2011 did not change the legal situation of worship. Due to the non-application of the 1905 law to these territories, the religious regime resulting from these decrees authorises public funding of worship. Moreover, placed under close state supervision, the boards of directors of the various religions enjoy tax benefits as in France.

These different systems of worship – all of which derogate from the 1905 separation of the Churches and the State – allow us to better appreciate the depth and complexity of French history in terms of the management of religion, compared with what the vulgate most often teaches us. This proves the French inventiveness and flexibility in this area, which has enabled better adapting the legal system for guaranteeing the freedom of religion or belief to local situations.⁵

Secularism disfigured by both authoritarian republicanism and far-right populism?

Legal secularism is a principle that guarantees the exercise of all positive freedoms offered to individual citizens in France. It can in no way be confused with a strictly philosophical value, nor can it be transformed into a particular ideology supported by the state. On the contrary, the latter must defend it against anyone who wants to impose it in a unilateral and authoritarian manner as a philosophy professing militant atheism. If this were the case, secularism would risk being transformed into a kind of disguised republican civil religion, exclusive and therefore – in the long run – necessarily intolerant of other belief and value systems. Its transformation into a kind of secularism of combat, into a kind of opposable secularism, would then inevitably attack the public expression of the diversity of particular opinions. Beyond the obvious restrictions on freedom of religion or belief that it might induce, such a vision of secularism

5 Portier, Philippe: *L'État et les religions en France. Une sociologie historique de la laïcité*, Rennes: PUR 2016.

would therefore seriously undermine the guarantee of another essential human right, namely freedom of expression for all, framed only by the legal restrictions deemed necessary to preserve the rule of law. The French state must be secular, neutral, impartial and intrinsically indifferent to all ideological and religious proposals. Only this neutrality of the state and its legal representatives can ensure that society is not subjected to it. The stakes are high: a society that is forced to be secular runs the risk of being artificially consensual and therefore fatally impoverished in its vital forces. It is in fact because the individuals making up society are not obliged to be neutral in any way that society can continue to be a space common to all, in which contradictory debate – a prerequisite for any democratic functioning – remains possible and always alive.

The incessant controversies and anathemas – today as in the past in the public debate, about the “true” definition of French secularism⁶ – unfortunately maintain this dangerous confusion for the preservation of freedom of religion or belief. Moreover, calls to ban religious symbols in the social sphere as a whole – which generally emanate from the political extremes of the right or the left – are a symptom of this very political struggle that aims to weaken the democratic liberalism that constitutes society in the long term. In a context troubled by the Islamist attacks, marked by an almost desperate demand for more and more security, this anti-liberal fight is even infecting some actors of the more moderate parties. The “fight for secularism” is chanted by both the declinists – forever nostalgic for a mythical traditional society – and the supporters of a French republican identity with a xenophobic tone. These approaches seriously threaten individual freedom and the carefully balanced nature of our pluralist society.

For several years, a widely circulated current of thought has been giving a particularly ethnicised and essentialised reading of the principle of secularism, based on the questionable hypothesis of a “clash of civilizations.”⁷ The primary matrix of secularism is said to be essentially constituted by its Christian theological roots, conveniently disregarding the equally Greco-Latin philosophical origin of Western culture. Islam as a religion and the matrix of a particular civilisation – considered authoritarian, submissive and retrograde

6 Baubérot, Jean: *Les Sept Laïcités françaises. Le modèle français de laïcité n'existe pas*, Paris: Maison des sciences de l'homme 2015.

7 Huntington, Samuel: *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1996.

– could not therefore think of the idea of secularism, let alone apply it to the political reality in its sphere of influence. There would therefore be incompatibility – in fact and in principle – between a Christian vision progressively acclimatised to modern liberalism and pluralism and a Muslim vision necessarily exclusive of these liberal legal-political principles that it could only fight, including by arms and terror.

However, looking back to the past, these ethnocentric and anti-religious discourses are not new. As early as 1905, certain radical republicans – proponents of progress – considered that the Catholic religion as a theological-political system was necessarily and definitively incompatible with secularism. Since then, following the Catholic acceptance of the modern principle of liberal and democratic state government, the traditional anti-clericalism of a certain left has spread beyond its political spectrum to influence the discourses of the right and the populist extreme right. Under the guise of defending secularism, for some decades the latter have been advocating a political radicalism that is properly anti-Muslim. The traditional anti-religious discourse has thus been transformed and – playing on social fears – gradually tinged with racism. It has done so by more or less consciously confusing an ethnic group (North Africans, Middle Easterners, etc.) with a supposed religious group (Muslims). This tendency has been further aggravated by the trauma caused by jihadist-inspired terrorism, which invokes its supposedly unconditional respect for the Islamic injunctions of the mythical beginnings of this religion in support of its murderous struggle.

Since the end of the 1970s and the global shock of Iran's successful Islamic revolution in 1979, debates about immigrant populations from Muslim countries have often focused solely on the Islamic character of their identity, blaming their difficult integration into Western society solely on their religion. Ignoring other explanatory factors such as the cultural deficit linked to poverty and social relegation, "Islamic values" quickly appeared to be the absolute antithesis of Western values and thus the secular ideal. Mixing the promotion of gender equality, religious fundamentalism and terrorism, religious visibility and the supposed neutrality of the public space, the debate has become considerably impoverished and deeply divisive. Religious and social intolerance are dangerously combined in a xenophobic approach, especially in the rise of populist and identity-based movements in the run-up to important elections that polarise the sides.

The return of a policy of religious control

However, the Muslim presence has forced Western states – including France – to question their conception of nationhood and citizenship to reassure the natives while integrating the newcomers.⁸ At the same time, the modern state must fight against discrimination, not only racial discrimination but also increasingly cultural and religious discrimination (anti-Semitism and Islamophobia). Thus, to varying degrees, the state's involvement in the organisation of the Muslim religion on French soil has highlighted a concern for renewed control of the religion of these populations by the public authorities (the law of 15 March 2004 on religious symbols in schools, the law consolidating the principles of the Republic of 24 August 2021, insistent demands for repressive legislation on the wearing of the Islamic headscarf in early childhood structures, during school outings, at university, in the public space, etc.). This control also involves the invention – and the difficult implementation – of “mainstream” religious or community bodies that are strongly encouraged by the state to combat radicalisation and the terrorism practised by political Islamism.⁹ Amongst these, the French Council of the Muslim Faith created in 2003 (*Conseil français du culte musulman*, CFCM) was finally disavowed by the state in 2022 and replaced by a new body, the Forum for the Islam of France (*Forum de l'Islam de France*, FORIF). Aiming to move from a secularism of freedom to a secularism of control, this type of public policy is currently gaining strength in France. In the long term, it threatens the initial liberalism of secularism as defined by the 1905 law by arbitrarily subjecting individuals to their supposed community affiliation.

Even if the law of 15 March 2004 is not presented as a law applicable only to Muslims in France, and young Sikh boys have been called to order due to the wearing of their traditional turban in public school, it is nevertheless part of a context marked by a strong rise in anti-Muslim sentiment in French society since the late-1980s. This state of mind has been fuelled by a populist political proposal that makes immigrants the scapegoats of the French economic and identity crisis. Indeed, these immigrants are regularly accused by some of not wanting to assimilate as they should into their host society. This feeling of rejection has further developed in a troubled national and international

8 Roy, Olivier: *La Laïcité face à l'islam*, Paris: Stock 2005.

9 Fregosi, Franck: *L'Islam dans la laïcité*, Paris: Hachette Pluriel 2011.

context, marked in Western countries and particularly in France by jihadist attacks (from 1995 to the present day). A disturbing and xenophobic equivalence has been made in some minds between Islamist projects (and attacks) and the demand for visibility and recognition presented by Muslims in society. In the face of social distress and silence about the symbolic consequences of the colonial wars, and in particular the Algerian war, the demand for assimilation made to immigrants and their descendants has proved to be more incantatory than effective. It is based on a demand for the abstract equalisation of all citizens, which no longer works in our increasingly open, multi-racial and pluralist societies. It is through this prism that we can understand the existence of recurrent debates over the past 30 years about the wearing of religious symbols in the public space, as well as – for example – the possibility or not of alternative menus to pork in school canteens or in closed public establishments. They are relayed in the media sphere by the highlighting of a few examples of incivility noticed in public establishments, such as the questioning of gender equality in interpersonal relations (challenging a doctor due to his or her sex, refusing to shake the hand of a colleague of the other sex, requesting exemption from certain courses – even though they are compulsory – or sports sessions practised in mixed classes).

Religious visibility through clothing choices is the sign of a real societal tension, which is stronger in France than elsewhere. This can be partly explained by the strength of an anti-religious tradition held by a part of French society, generally on the left. Raised with a visceral distrust of the public expression of religious affiliation, they see only obscurantism and obstinate irrationality in the phenomena of belief. The rhetoric of the necessary emancipation from religious control seems to always mark the discourses that claim to be progressive. This may help to explain the disturbing convergence – emanating from the two extremes of the political spectrum – of these rejections of religious visibility in the public space, and more specifically of the Muslim one, in a context of particularly reinforced security demands. Faced with the renewed tension between the ideal of a secularism of abstention and the actual practice of a secularism of recognition and control, the French political conception of secularism is particularly questioned. The idea of a purified secularism as a French exception increasingly appears to be a national myth and a discourse that is partisan, instrumentalised and disconnected from reality. Combining the state's requirement for neutrality and philosophical and religious impartiality with the preservation of public order in a society affected by the globalisation remains a challenge. The requirements of the

rule of law are thus put into perspective in a context marked by a legitimate demand for security in the face of jihadist attacks. However, it is to be hoped that the regulatory adjustments necessary for civil peace will always be made with primary respect for the liberal principles enshrined in international texts, and in particular with respect for the non-discrimination on religious grounds that they imply.

Conclusion

The principle of secularism is therefore faced with renewed challenges, including the tension between the need to welcome immigrant or displaced populations and the concern to preserve the security of populations already settled. Current policies more or less intentionally undermine a more reassuring sociological reality that shows that French Muslims are in favour of secularism. This is proven by regular surveys with relatively unanimous conclusions on the effectiveness of the integration of recent immigrant populations.¹⁰ They show that French Muslims are quite comfortable with their civil and religious life in a plural society and regularly demonstrate their attachment to it, particularly during the major challenges faced by the French nation. However, these challenges place not only the idea of secularism at stake, but also the guarantee of individual freedoms for all, whether or not they are Muslim.

It is important to remember the difference between secularism as a legal-political principle and secularism as an ideological, moral and/or security value. Conceptual words always have a history and their evolution is significant of contextual changes.¹¹ Legal secularism is not an ideological movement, but the principle that allows for the free expression of all beliefs while respecting the law and public order. Discourses of the secular-identitarian type, transposing the logic of the scapegoat, Jews, Muslims, Roma, refugees, instrumentalised and racialised by certain politicians, are a real deviation from the principle of liberal origin that is secularism. Because the individuals who make up

10 INSEE (Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques): Immigrés et descendants d'immigrés (= Insee Références Édition 2023), <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/6793314?sommaire=6793391>, accessed on: 24 Apr. 2023.

11 Thiéry-Riboulot, Véronica: Usage, abus et usure du mot laïcité, Paris: Les Conférences de l'EPHE 2022.

minorities are unjustly feared, despised, or even rejected, it is urgent for citizens to be vigilant and combative.

Secularism is first and foremost the guarantee of the freedom of each individual in all his or her uniqueness. Because they are necessary for collective life in a truly democratic state, freedoms – of conscience, religion, belief and expression – must be scrupulously reaffirmed and applied to all without exception, in accordance with the wording of Article 1 of the Constitution: the Republic “ensures the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion.”

In order to renew and revitalise the principle of secularism, we must therefore continue to respect the most fundamental human rights, such as the freedom of expression spontaneously defended by several million people who took to the streets on 11 January 2015, following the murderous attacks on the editorial staff of the weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* and the customers of the *Hypercashier*. However, this must be allowed for all, and certainly not at the expense of freedom of religion or belief of certain politically or socially stigmatised groups. In practice, respect for the legal principle of secularism as it has been historically defined in France must not lead to the sole implementation by the state of a policy of control and targeted bans, but rather seek to deepen the process of integration and adherence of all citizens to shared values through dialogue, beyond their differences of religious belief or non-belief.

Restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief in Denmark

A Populist Move?

Eva Maria Lassen and Marie Juul Petersen

Introduction: Freedom of religion or belief under pressure

Denmark is a democracy with high human rights standards, including the right to freedom of religion or belief. However, in recent years an increasing number of laws have been introduced that implicitly or explicitly limit – or have the potential to limit – freedom of religion or belief. The substantial part of this legislation targets Muslim individuals and communities in particular.¹

This trend towards increasing restrictions on religious manifestations and practices is not unique to Denmark, as other European countries display similar developments. The introduction to this volume as well as several of the book's chapters argue that these developments can be understood as expressions of an increasingly populist understanding and use of the right to freedom of religion or belief, in the sense that restrictions are selective and particularistic (aimed at restricting the religious practices and manifestations of particular religious groups) and clientelistic (aimed at protecting the religious practices and manifestations of one's own group). However, while there are aspects of the Danish legislation on freedom of religion or belief – and the debates

1 For an overview of legal restrictions on religion in Denmark, see Lassen, Eva Maria: "Limitations to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Denmark," in: *Religion & Human Rights 15* (2020), pp. 134–152; Vinding, Niels V.: *Annotated Legal Documents on Islam in Europe. Denmark (= Annotated legal documents on Islam in Europe 18)*, Leiden/Boston: Brill 2020. For an analysis of selected individual laws, see Petersen, Marie Juul: "Forkynderloven i et menneskeretligt perspektiv," in: Anette Faye Jacobsen/Steven Jensen/Pernille Boye Koch/Marie Juul Petersen (eds.), *Menneskerettigheder i modvind*, København: Samfundslitteratur 2023, pp. 137–153.

around it – that may be characterised as populist, this chapter argues that populism is insufficient as an explanatory framework for understanding the situation in Denmark. Indeed, there are other factors at play. More specifically, we argue that populist voices are intertwined with, first, the historically and demographically determined place of Evangelical-Lutheran Christianity vis-à-vis other religious denominations and religions in Danish society and mentality, second, the kind of secularism experienced in Denmark, and thirdly, the relationship between the mainstream political parties and right-wing parties, representing different assessments of human rights.

“To protect Danish values”: A selective understanding of freedom of religion or belief

Denmark has historically been a largely homogeneous society, including religiously. The Danish Evangelical-Lutheran Church – of which the majority of the population are members – holds a special position as “the People’s Church” (in Danish, *folkekirke*) and is supported by the state in a number of ways, financially and otherwise (for instance public holidays that follow the Evangelical-Lutheran calendar and university education of theologians to the Church). The position of the church as well as other religious communities is based on the Constitution of 1849, which was last amended in 1953. The constitution affords the People’s Church a privileged position compared to other religious communities, as reflected in the saying: “In Denmark we have religious freedom but not religious equality.”

While 73% of the population are members of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church, a number of studies suggest that religion plays little – if any – role in the lives of most Danes.²

Since the 1970s, like other Western European countries, Denmark has experienced increasing immigration in the form of guest workers, immigrants and refugees from different parts of the world. The majority are Muslim, and

2 Hackett, Conrad/Huynh, Timmy: “What is each country’s second-largest religious group?” (22 Jun. 2015), <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/06/22/what-is-each-countrys-second-largest-religious-group/>, accessed on: 22 Jul. 2023; Zuckerman, Phil: *Society without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment*, New York: NYU Press 2008.

Islam makes up the largest minority religion in Denmark today. The increasing religious diversity – and not least visibility – associated with immigration has challenged Danish society, having to encompass new religious norms and values, including some that may challenge the majority culture and lead to discomfort, disagreements, and outright conflict.³ Denmark has moved from being a largely secular or “cultural Christian” society to what the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has termed a “post-secular society.”⁴ With this, Habermas does not mean a society in which all citizens have become more religious, but one with a changed consciousness about religion: an understanding of religion as something that cannot be kept out of the public sphere but will remain an inevitable part of society.⁵

There is a focus on Islam as one of the root causes of the various “integration challenges” that Danish society has encountered in the wake of increased immigration. The issue of integration is highly complex, and this is not the place to discuss whether or to what extent there is an empirical basis for this emphasis on religion as an explanatory factor over economic, cultural, political or other factors, for instance. It suffices here to say that recent decades have witnessed the emergence of anti-Islam – or indeed anti-Muslim – sentiments among politicians, in the media and the broader population, whereby certain Muslim norms and practices are perceived as colliding with certain “Danish values,” for example around democracy, gender equality and free speech.

Reflecting broader trends towards the increasing “juridification” of societal problems, one of the ways in which Danish politicians have sought to solve these – perceived or real – clashes between “Danish values” and Muslim norms and practices has been to introduce legislation to restrict the latter in different ways. The so-called Imam package adopted in 2017 is an illustrative example of this. The initiative was a direct reaction to a series of TV documentaries with the title “The Mosques behind the Veil,” aired in February 2016. The documentaries – which were based on under-cover observations and hidden recordings in a number of Danish mosques – caused a major furore insofar as they gave

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- 3 Bielefeldt, Heiner: Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief on his mission to Denmark (A/HRC/34/50/Add. 1), Human Rights Council 2017, p. 12.
 - 4 Habermas, Jürgen: “Notes on post-secular society,” in: *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25 (4/2008), pp. 17–29.
 - 5 Kühle, Lene/Veyrup Nielsen, Marie: “Mere kontrol med religion? Den nye trossamfundslø,” in: *Religion i Danmark* 10 (2021), pp. 38–48.

an impression of some imams condoning intimate partner violence and corporal punishment of children, while they considered stoning to be a legitimate religious reaction to for example infidelity.⁶

The programmes were criticised by several academic experts, including for their use of problematic methods and their insufficient understanding of Islamic theology and practice.⁷ Nonetheless, many politicians were convinced that the problems displayed in the documentaries were real and substantial, and that they required immediate legal action.⁸ In May 2016, the government, Social Democrats, Danish People's Party, and the Conservatives therefore entered an agreement to introduce a stricter oversight of religious communities, expanded possibilities for the withdrawal of economic support to these communities, an entry ban for certain religious preachers, and restrictions on certain kinds of expressions made in the context of religious teaching.

From this perspective, recent restrictions can be seen as expressions of a selective or particularistic understanding of the right to freedom of religion or belief, implicitly or explicitly targeting the expressions, practices, and manifestations of a particular religious group. The fact that there seems to be a certain unwillingness on the part of politicians to apply the same rigid standards in cases involving even strongly anti-Muslim discourses may contribute to this reading of the restrictions. It is noteworthy that "The Mosques behind the Veil" led to immediate legal interventions, while authorities would go a very long way to protect the Danish provocateur Rasmus Paludan's extremist expressions and Quran burnings.⁹ Others have noted that cases of sexual ha-

6 Commission on freedom of expression: *Ytringsfrihedens rammer og vilkår i Danmark*, Søborg: Danish Ministry of Justice 2020, p. 129.

7 Vinding: *Legal Documents*; Suhr, Christian: "Usædvanlig bred og uafviselig dokumentation" – undersøgende journalistik i danske moskéer," in: Vibeke Borberg/Hjarn von Zernichow Borberg/Christian Suhr/Niels V. Vinding (eds.), *Når medierne sætter dagsordenen*, København: Djøf Forlag 2021, chapter 7.

8 Christoffersen, Lisbet: "Religionsretlig lovgivning 2014–2019 – bidrag og temaer i kirkeretsantologi," in: Lisbet Christoffersen/Anders Jørgensen/Svend Andersen (eds.), *Religionsretlig lovgivning. Kirkeretsantologi 2019*, Frederiksberg: Eksistensen 2019, p. 12.

9 Rose, Flemming/Mchangama, Jacob: "Altinget: Drop racismeparagraffen for minoriteternes skyld" (12 May 2020), <https://justitia-int.org/altinget-drop-racismeparagraffen-for-minoriteternes-skyld/>, accessed on: 22 Jul. 2023. While government attitudes to Paludan's and other right wing extremists' Quran burnings have changed very recently, and a majority now seems to support criminalization of such actions, this arguably has little to do with concerns for the religious sentiments of Danish Muslims,

rassment and gender discrimination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Pentecostal churches and the Catholic Church in Denmark have not been met with the same urgency by politicians compared with similar cases in Muslim communities.¹⁰

“Denmark is a Christian country”

Over the past decades, the Danish People’s Party – a self-declared “Islam-critical” right-wing party – has played a key role in this development towards an increasingly narrow conception of the right to freedom of religion or belief, consistently proposing restrictions that target Muslim practices and manifestations.

An important part of the party’s argumentation is that such restrictions are necessary to protect Christian majority culture and values. As such, their argumentation reflects a clientelistic conception of the freedom of religion or belief as a right that can be used to restrict the beliefs and practices of others to protect one’s own religion. This is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in their proposal to ban headscarves in Danish elementary schools, where the party argues that a ban is necessary to protect Christian culture from Islamic mission:¹¹

“Denmark is a Christian country and has for centuries been shaped by Christianity [...] Our culture, and as such our public institutions are based on Christianity and Christian values. Christianity and Christian holidays are visible in schools and public institutions in the form of adornments, Christmas and Easter decorations, Christian holidays as well as other Christian traditions, e.g. visits to the Church, hymn-singing, and possibly prayer at morning gatherings. At the same time as we in Denmark have a long tradition of Christianity being present everywhere, we also have a tradition

and more to do with international pressure and security risks. The present article does not consider these recent developments, since they occurred after the manuscript was finalised.

10 Hussein, Tarek Z.: “Tavshed om kirkelige krænkelser er hyklerisk” (27 Feb. 2023), <http://politiken.dk/debat/klummer/art9224667/Tavshed-om-kirkelige-kr%C3%A6nkels-er-er-hyklerisk>, accessed on: 22 Jul. 2023.

11 Quotes that have been published in Danish have been translated into English by the authors of the chapter.

of not proselytising for other religions, sects, or political ideologies in public institutions [...] When women carry an Islamic headscarf, they engage consciously or unconsciously in mission for Islam. There should be no space for this in Danish public institutions.”¹²

However, the formal political power of the Danish People’s Party is limited, and it is not in a position to have laws passed through parliament without the support of more mainstream parties, notably the Social Democrats, the Liberal Party, the Conservatives, and – most recently – the Moderates (a new liberal centre-right party). These parties may – at least rhetorically – share the understanding of Christianity as an essential part of Danish identity and culture: in fact, the Political Programme of the current government – which comprises the Social Democrats, the Liberal Party, and the Moderates – states that “Denmark is a Christian country.”¹³ Nonetheless, they do not link this to the need for restrictions on certain religious practices and manifestations.

Instead, they tend to justify restrictions with reference to secular “Danish values” of democracy, gender equality, children’s rights, etc. As Søren Pape – the leader of the Conservative Party – stated during the parliamentary debate on the Imam package: “If we want a society in which tolerance, freedom and security can thrive, we will sometimes have to put our feet down when it comes to types like these preachers”.¹⁴ Alternatively, in the words of Mattias Tesfaye, then Minister of Integration: “When democracy and religion collide, democracy has the right of way.”¹⁵ From this perspective, the purpose of restrictions is not to protect a particular religious culture or community but rather protect universally acknowledged values and principles.

12 Beslutningsforslag nr. B 47: Forslag til folketingsbeslutning om forbud mod at bære islamisk tørklæde i offentlige institutioner, Folketinget 2020.

13 Regeringen (Danish Government): Regeringsgrundlag: Ansvar for Danmark Oct. 2022. The formulation was introduced by the Liberal Party in their 2015 Political Programme, when they were a minority government with the Danish People’s Party as supporting party.

14 Lovforslag nr. L18: Forslag til Lov om ændring af straffeloven (Kriminalisering af udtrykkelig billigelse af visse strafbare handlinger som led i religiøs oplæring), Folketinget 2016, first debate.

15 Socialdemokratiet: Mathias Tesfayes tale ved Socialdemokratiets kongres 2017 (17 Sep. 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_P2dKi469Y, accessed on: 22 Jul. 2023.

Staying within the limits of the European Human Rights Convention

The strong adherence to human rights standards in Danish legislation further complicates the understanding of recent restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief as selective and clientelistic. Despite increasing criticism in recent years, human rights are important to Danish politicians, and much is done to ensure that legislation – including on freedom of religion or belief – lives up to the standards enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights.

As a result, proposals that clearly contradict international human rights standards are typically short-lived. For instance, this applies to the Danish People's Party's 2021 proposal to register the religious affiliation of persons applying for Danish citizenship. Arguing for the necessity of this initiative, the leader of the party Morten Messerschmidt said: "For many people, being a Muslim raises some fundamental problems with regard to living in a Danish way. Whether it is about views on women, or views on the law or democracy. That is why we want to know which background these people [who apply for citizenship] bring with them."¹⁶ While individual members of the Social Democrats – the ruling party at the time – were initially open to discussing the proposal, the Minister of Justice soon highlighted that "[w]ithin the framework of Denmark's international obligations, it will not be possible to place any weight on information about an applicant's religious conviction in the assessment of an application for Danish citizenship."¹⁷ From this perspective, the European Human Rights Convention protects – including in practice – against overly selective or discriminatory restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief.

However, in other cases, adherence to European human rights principles of non-discrimination is arguably of a more nominal character. To avoid accusations of discrimination and stay safely within the limits of the European Convention on Human Rights, the politicians aim at "universalising" restrictions that may have originally been aimed at a particular religious group. The ban on face covering in public is an obvious example. The ban was explicitly motivated by a desire to restrict Muslim women's use of burka and niqab, seen to be an expression of "negative social control" and oppression of women, and

16 Broberg, Mads Bonde: "Dansk Folkeparti vil have muslimer frem i lyset: Nye statsborgeres religion skal stå i lov," in: Jyllands-Posten (26 Feb. 2021).

17 Kotkas, Birk Sebastian: "DF vil registrere nye statsborgeres religion: Nu har regeringen set på, om det er lovligt," in: Altinget (27 Mar. 2021).

as such a challenge to Danish values of gender equality and women's rights. However, since a ban exclusively on burka and niqab would have entailed a risk of indirect discrimination, the law ended up as a ban on different types of face coverings, legitimised more broadly with reference to the need to "promote and facilitate social interaction and co-existence."¹⁸

From the perspective of the European Court of Human Rights, this is legitimate. The court applies an increasingly wide margin of appreciation in cases related to religion, meaning that member states can go quite far in limiting the freedom of religion or belief within the framework of international obligations, as long as restrictions are not discriminatory, directly or indirectly. Since the case of *S.A.S v. France*, for instance, the court has allowed states to use the protection of vaguely defined notions of "co-existence," "social cohesion" and "living together" as legitimate grounds for restrictions on religious practices and manifestations.¹⁹ In their argumentation for the ban on face covering in the public sphere, Danish legislators leaned precisely on this and other recent case law of the court. As such, the European Court of Human Rights can arguably be said to legitimise rather than prevent the increasingly expansive restrictions on the freedom of religion or belief in Denmark.

In practice, what seems to limit the intended particularism of restrictions is not so much the European Convention on Human Rights but rather the extent to which particularistic restrictions can be "universalised" without extensive implications for other religious or non-religious groups in society. The "universalisation" of the burka ban was feasible to Danish politicians because other types of face coverings could be banned with only few practical implications for others than women wearing burka and niqab. Proposals that cannot be "universalised" in the same way without extensive implications for other religious groups tend to fail. This was arguably the case with the proposal to introduce obligatory translation of all sermons into Danish, which was presented by the Social Democrats as part of its election campaign in 2019 with the aim to counter anti-democratic expressions of certain Muslim preachers.²⁰ When the Social Democrats came into power, the proposal was included in the government's 2020 to 2021 legislative programme, stating

18 Lovforslag nr. LSF 219: Forslag til lov om ændring af straffeloven, Folketinget 2018, subsection 1.

19 *S.A.S. v. France* [GC], no. 43835/11, ECHR 2014.

20 Krak, Nikolaj: "S. Der er brug for større åbenhed om, hvad der foregår i trossamfund," in: Kristeligt Dagblad (30 May 2019).

the need to “create more openness around religious preachers when they are preaching in other languages than Danish.”²¹ The proposal was met with substantial criticism from international lawyers and human rights experts as well as religious actors, both nationally and internationally. In addition to questioning the legitimacy of such restrictions from a human rights perspective or more broadly Denmark’s international obligations, the criticism also made it clear that obligatory translations would have extensive implications for a wide range of religious communities, including non-Danish speaking Christian communities. The proposal is not on the law programme of the current government (2023).

Lack of religious literacy

Over the past 20 years Denmark has witnessed a move towards an increasingly restrictive understanding of the right to freedom of religion or belief, as manifested in various laws and law proposals. While this development has been met with criticism from religious actors, left-wing parties as well as various human rights experts and NGOs, opposition has largely been modest. The vast majority of laws were adopted with support from a wide range of political parties, and as such must be assumed to be supported by the majority of the population. Anti-Muslim sentiments and the – perceived or real – integration challenges associated with Islam alone cannot explain this apparent acceptance of restrictions on a fundamental human right. Broader secularist tendencies and religious illiteracy in Danish society arguably also play an important role in explaining this willingness to restrict religious practices and manifestations.

Danish society is non-religious in many ways. Religion may very well be afforded greater attention in the post-secular society, although this is not necessarily the same as greater acceptance, understanding, or knowledge of religion. Many people do not consider religion relevant at all, and among those that do, the majority seem to have a negative perception of religion. For example, a 2022 poll indicated that more than 70% of the Danish population see religion as a source of conflict, while only 80% see it as a source of peace.²²

21 Regeringen: Lovgivning Folketingsåret 2020/2021, Oct. 2020, p. 29.

22 Tulinius, Bjørg: “Et stort flertal af danskerne ser religion som kilde til konflikt. Kun få tror, at religion fører til fred,” in: Kristeligt Dagblad (10 Jul. 2022).

Many of the laws mentioned above reflect this alienation from – and in some cases even suspicion of – religion, not only Islam but rather religion more broadly. One example is the 2022 law proposal to ensure youth organisations' access to youth educational institutions. Here, ordinary “youth organisations that are engaged in the society” are ensured access, while religious youth organisations that are “seeking access in order to gain new members or [that] act in a brash or preaching manner” are not given the same right.²³ Religion is thus understood to be something fundamentally different from – and more problematic than – political and other (secular) world views and ideologies.²⁴

Summing up

Over the past ten to fifteen years, Denmark has witnessed a move towards an increasingly restrictive understanding of the right to freedom of religion or belief, expressed in legal acts and proposals of such. Many factors contribute to an understanding of this development. Denmark has historically been a highly homogeneous society in religious terms, with the vast majority of the population belonging to the People's Church, which holds a constitutionally-based privileged position. At the same time – and perhaps paradoxically – Danish society has also been strongly secularist, with large parts of the population considering religion as something “private.”

With immigration, Danish society has become more religiously diverse, and it now has to encompass new – and much more visible – religious norms, practices and manifestations, including some that run counter to those of the “cultural Christian” or secular majority. In this post-secular society, Islam has come to be seen by many as a threat to “Danishness,” whether understood in terms of Christian or secular values. Reflecting this, the majority of recent restrictions on freedom of religion or belief have been aimed selectively at Muslim practices and manifestations.

Populist political parties – in particular the Danish People's Party – have played an important role in facilitating this development, consistently proposing restrictions on a wide range of Muslim practices and manifestations with

23 Law proposal on youth organisations' access to youth education, remarks to §1.

24 Ank, Ingrid: “Kritik af nyt lovforslag: Gymnasielever må gerne tro på demokratiet, men ikke på Gud,” in: *Kristeligt Dagblad* (20 Jun. 2022).

the somewhat clientelist aim to protect “Christian culture and values.” However, the actual laws have been adopted by a broad range of parties, challenging the understanding of restrictions as “populist.” While the mainstream political parties may share the desire to selectively restrict practices and manifestations of particular religious communities, they also emphasise the importance of adhering to European human rights standards. As such, much is done to “universalise” restrictions, ensuring that legislation on freedom of religion or belief lives up to the standards enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights and the case law of the European Court of Human Rights.

Further complicating the picture, there are restrictions that cannot easily be explained with reference to anti-Muslim sentiments and – perceived or real – integration challenges but instead reflect a broader scepticism or even suspicion of religion more generally. From this perspective, restrictions of freedom of religion or belief may not be expressions of populist right-wing sentiments but rather of a dominant non-religious mentality among broad segments of the population, perceiving freedom of religion or belief as a right that is less important than other human rights.

What does the future hold? In December 2022, a new government made up of Social Democrats, the Liberal Party and the Moderates (a new Social Liberal party) came into power. Unlike previous governments, the new government has the majority in parliament, and as such does not depend on the Danish People’s Party or similar populist parties. This might mean that integration and Islam – key issues for the Danish People’s Party – will receive less political attention in the coming years, in a trend already witnessed during elections where these issues were remarkably absent from political debates. As such, we may expect a decrease in new restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, at least when it comes to restrictions motivated by anti-Muslim sentiments and “integration challenges.” However, at the same time, there are no signs of the government cancelling existing restrictions on freedom of religion or belief, or indeed encouraging a more religiously inclusive society in other ways. In other words, restrictions on certain religious practices and manifestations have become the “new normal” in Denmark.

To conclude on a slightly more positive note, the move towards an increasingly restrictive understanding of freedom of religion or belief has also had a number of encouraging consequences. In recent history, the right to freedom of religion or belief has not played a prominent role in Danish public debate: at best, it was a right that was taken for granted, and at worst one that was considered superfluous and irrelevant. However, recent restrictions have

encouraged intense debates and a renewed acknowledgement of the importance of this right, at least among segments of the population. Furthermore – and perhaps more importantly – opposition to the restrictions has brought together organisations, institutions, and individuals across religious divides, as well as across secular/religious divides, facilitating new alliances, partnerships and friendships among actors united in their understanding of the right to freedom of religion or belief as a universal right for all and a cornerstone in a democratic society.

Commitment to Religious Freedom at the Level of the European Union

A Victim of Polarisation?

Bernd Hirschberger and Katja Voges

After the various institutions of the EU had set things in motion in a positive manner in several respects in the 2010s regarding advocacy for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), an increasing polarisation can be observed today in the debates on this human right at the European level. The political right-wing is engaging in client politics, thereby seeking to appropriate the issue for themselves, while liberal and left-wing forces seem to be increasingly reluctant from engaging in activities promoting religious freedom with high publicity.

A positive development regarding advocacy for FoRB in the 2010s

There was a brief phase in the mid-2010s when a number of rather considerable successes were achieved globally regarding promoting FoRB at the EU level:

- June 2013 saw the European Union's Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) adopting the **EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief**. The members of the Council established in the guidelines that breaches of FoRB may exacerbate intolerance, and often constitute early indicators of potential violence and conflicts.¹ The guidelines provide the EU delegations and member states' embassies and consulates with practical

¹ Council of the European Union: EU Guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief. Foreign Affairs Council meeting Luxembourg, 24 June 2013, para. 1, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/137585.pdf, accessed on: 4 Sep. 2023.

instructions for their work, and contain important information in this regard on the understanding of FoRB, as well as elucidating the link to other human rights and formulating specific prospects for action for enhancing FoRB.

- The office of a **Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union** was furthermore established in 2016. Jean-Claude Juncker appointed the Slovak politician Ján Figel' from the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) as the first Special Envoy in the same year.
- The work of the **Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance** in this phase can also be regarded as relatively successful. The Intergroup is intended to ensure that in its international relations the EU promotes and protects the right of the individual to freely express their convictions (whether theistic, non-theistic or atheistic). All political groups of the European Parliament were actively involved in the Intergroup between 2014 and 2019 on a broad basis, albeit to differing extents.

Between withdrawal and polarisation

However, these successful developments have unfortunately not been continued in recent years. In fact, one may observe that religious freedom has increasingly become a polarising topic at the EU level:

- For instance, there have repeatedly been heated debates concerning the office of the **Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside the European Union**. Some criticised Ján Figel', with his detractors particularly including liberal, left-wing, green and social democratic delegates who accuse him of having “undermined the credibility of the mandate by showing highly problematic acquaintances with organisations opposing women’s sexual rights and LGBTI people’s rights.”² In response to

2 European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF): Mandate of the EU Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief: Call to improve transparency and to appoint a candidate with a strong human rights record (14 Sep. 2020), <https://www.epfweb.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/EU%20Special%20Envoy%20on%20FoRB-%20Final%20version%20EC%20President.pdf>, accessed on: 16 Oct. 2023.

such a complaint, European Ombudsman Emily O'Reilly found fault in that the mandate of the Special Envoy was not sufficiently clear, and that the documents setting out his mandate and work plan were not available to the public.³ There was also repeated contention concerning whether the office should be continued at all. When the mandate of the Special Envoy expired in October 2019, the European Commission initially stated shortly later that the office was not to be extended. In response to criticism on the part of Members of Parliament (MEPs) and Member States as well as representatives of various religious communities, in July 2020 the Commission decided to appoint a new Envoy, and Christos Stylianides took over the post in May 2021. However, Stylianides only held the office for five months. It was only after the post had been vacant for more than one year that a new incumbent was appointed on 7 December 2022 in the person of the diplomat Frans van Daele, who was already 75 years old at that time.

- There was also heated discussion of the **European Guidelines on FoRB**: while the guidelines set out an ambitious framework for promoting FoRB, the implementation of the guidelines fell short in practice.⁴ These shortcomings made it easy for the far-right groups European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) to level criticism in the debate on the tenth anniversary of the EU Guidelines on FoRB⁵ with inadequate efforts on the part of the EU for religious freedom. Some MEPs from the far-right parties added to their criticism the accusation that the European institutions appeared to be more active regarding gender and LGBTIQ issues than religious freedom. The MEP who speaks on behalf

3 European Ombudsman: Decision in case 1553/2019/NH on the role of the EU's Special Envoy for the promotion of freedom of religion or belief outside of the EU (30 Jul. 2020), <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/decision/en/130887>, accessed on: 4 Sep. 2023.

4 Portaru, Adina: "The EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief at Their Fifth Anniversary: Implementation Lagging Behind?," in: Wolfgang Benedek/Philip Czech/Lisa Heschl/Karin Lukas/Manfred Nowak (eds.), *European Yearbook on Human Rights* 2018, Cambridge: Intersentia 2018, pp. 193–210.

5 The minutes of the plenary debate – on which the summary and the quotes that follow are based – can be accessed here: European Parliament: Verbatim report of proceedings (13 Jul. 2023), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2023-07-13-ITM-010_EN.html, accessed on: 16 Oct. 2023. Similar patterns were already on display in the plenary debate held on 3 October 2022 on the topic of The EU's actions in the field of freedom of religion or belief worldwide, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-10-03-ITM-013_EN.html, accessed on: 16 Oct. 2023.

of the ID group accuses “those on the left and the globalists” of “ruining” freedom of religion or belief, and betraying the “heritage of the forefathers” by promoting Islamism via a “multiculturalist ideology.” Criticism – albeit more moderate in tone – was also levelled by the representative of the centre-right European People’s Party (EPP). However, one notices that the group chose to be represented by none other than an MEP from the right-wing Christian Democratic People’s Party KDNP, the partner of Fidesz in the Hungarian Government, an administration that has come under criticism due to shortcomings regarding the rule of law and which takes a clientelistic and patronistic approach to religious freedom.⁶ The representative of the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) in the European Parliament – who comes from Poland – in turn uses the debate to make a case for secularism, and in doing so makes scathing attacks on his country’s right-wing government and accuses them of being implicated with problematic clerical structures, as well as misusing the term “Christian values.” In turn, the representative of the liberal Renew group stresses the importance of the fight against Islamism.

MEPs from the far-right groups ECR and ID dominate the debate in quantitative terms. They provide six out of eleven MEP contributions, although not one single member spoke for The Greens/European Free Alliance (EFA). While two members from The Left in the European Parliament (GUE/NGL) spoke, they did not so on behalf of their group, but rather as individual representatives.

The overall impression formed is that the in some cases very heated contributions have given rise to few concrete proposals concerning how the implementation of the guidelines can be improved. Some of the speeches in fact extend beyond the actual topic, and are used instead to make attacks on political opponents. One exception is the proposal of the ECR group to designate 24th June as European Anti-Religious Persecution Day,⁷ albeit this was mostly symbolic in nature.

6 See chapter “Hungary under Viktor Orbán: ‘Illiberal Christian Democracy’ and the Instrumentalisation of Religious Freedom”.

7 MEP Bert-Jan Ruissen repeated the call only a few days later, albeit this time with the diverging designation “European Day for the Promotion of Religion or Belief”: Ruissen, Bert-Jan: “It’s Time To Implement the EU Guidelines on the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief” (21 Jul. 2023), <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/commentary/its-time-to-implement-the-eu-guidelines-on-the-promotion-of-freedom-of-religion-or-belief/>, accessed on: 16 Oct. 2023.

- It is not only the distribution of speeches in central debates on FoRB that clearly indicates a trend towards the far-right groups presenting themselves as the defenders of religious freedom, particularly regarding the topic of persecuted Christians, while the more left-wing and/or secular-oriented members are shrinking from an open commitment to religious freedom. This trend also becomes clear regarding the membership of the intergroups of the European Parliament focussing on topics related to FoRB:
 - For instance, the far-right group ECR clearly dominated the **Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance** in mid-September 2023, with eight out of fifteen representatives. Moreover, with one representative from the ID group and one independent who had previously represented far-right parties, two further members were present who can be attributed to the far-right camp. The remaining groups together only made up one-third of the members (3x Renew, 1x EPP, 1x S&D). The Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL groups were no longer represented at all.⁸ In contrast to this, GUE/NGL had still provided two members of the Intergroup in the previous parliament in 2014 to 2019, including a Co-Chair, and The Greens/EFA also provided one of the Intergroup's Vice-Chairs. By contrast, ECR only provided three out of the fourteen members.⁹
 - An even more unambiguous dominance on the part of the far-right groups can be observed in mid-September 2023 in the **Intergroup on Christians in the Middle East**: 21 members are provided by the extreme right-wing group ID, and three further members by ECR. Seven others are independent but are all active or former members of extreme right-

8 European Parliament: Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance [IG9-14], <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/intergroup/6301/Intergroupe%20%C2%ABLibert%C3%A9%20de%20religion%20et%20de%20conviction%20et%20tol%C3%A9rance%20religieuse%C2%BB>, accessed on: 16 Oct. 2023.

9 European Parliament: Intergroup 'Freedom of Religion and Belief and Religious Tolerance.' List of the Members, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/files/organisation-and-rules/organisation/intergroups/legislative-list-of-member-freedom-of-religion-20151130.pdf>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

wing parties. Only two members belong to the EPP group. The other parliamentary groups are not represented at all.¹⁰

However, problems are caused by the withdrawal of left-wing and/or secular-oriented forces and their lack of replacement, not only because it provides scope to the far-right but also because it shows that it goes hand in hand with a loss of quality:

- While the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance previously published reports on the situation of religious freedom at intervals of two years, only one single report to date has been released in the current parliamentary term (2019–2024). It should also be noted that the 2017 report still emphasised cooperation with a consortium of independent scholars and with the European External Action Service (EEAS), while the 2021 report contains no such reference. The selection of civil society sources in the 2021 report is also somewhat limited, as almost all of the organisations named have a Christian or conservative background. Moreover, one notices careless mistakes and methodical shortcomings, as well as deteriorations, although it would exceed the scope of the present article to discuss this extensively.¹¹
- Moreover, the public relations work of the Intergroup has also deteriorated. Only highly sporadic updates are published on the Intergroup's social media channels, and the Intergroup's Facebook page was completely abandoned between 2018 and 2022.¹² However, a particular problem is that the Intergroup's Twitter channel is now also being used for sharing party-political posts unrelated to the work of the Intergroup. For instance, a congratulatory post from the ECR group for an election victory on the part of the far-right extremist Sweden Democrats was posted there in September

10 European Parliament: Intergroup on Christians in the Middle East [IG9-07], <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/intergroup/details/6294/Intergroup%20on%20Christians%20in%20the%20Middle%20East>, accessed on: 12 Sep. 2023.

11 European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance (FoRB & RT): Reports, <https://www.religiousfreedom.eu/work/>, accessed on: 20 Sep. 2023.

12 European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief: <https://www.facebook.com/epwgonforb>, accessed on: 4 Sep. 2023.

2022.¹³ The blog on the website of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance has also been used in recent years for the dissemination of partisan political messages, often using patterns such as those described in the section “Appropriation and reinterpretation of religious freedom by the far-right” later in this chapter.¹⁴

The precise reasons for the increased withdrawal by left-wing and/or secular-oriented forces from an open commitment to religious freedom that has been observed should be analysed in future studies. However, it is conceivable that attempts to appropriate the issue on the part of far-right regarding religious freedom as well as the commonly-held perception of the topic as “conservative” are acting as a deterrent towards left-wing and/or secular-oriented MEPs. Moreover, a role might be played by the fact that MEPs from such circles feel an uncertain or indeed distanced attitude towards religion as secularisation advances in Europe. Organisational problems furthermore appear to have a role to play.¹⁵

Appropriation and reinterpretation of religious freedom by the far-right

Another important reason for the increasing commitment to the issue of “religious freedom” and especially the sub-aspect of “supporting persecuted Christians” by the far-right groups is probably that these issues offer them a welcome opportunity to present themselves as “ordinary conservatives.” While leftists

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- 13 ECR Group (@ecrgroup): ‘Congratulations to @jimmiakesson & our friends from @sdriks for the excellent result in the Swedish national elections, coming out as the 2nd strongest party. The conservative message has a growing appeal across Europe.’ – ECR Co-Chairs Ryszard Legutko & @RaffaeleFitto (12 Sep. 2022), <https://twitter.com/ecrgroup/status/1569231883317248000>, accessed on: 4 Sep. 2023.
 - 14 European Parliament Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance (FoRB & RT): Blog, <https://www.religiousfreedom.eu/blog/>, accessed on: 2 Jan. 2024.
 - 15 Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (ed.): Einsatz für Religionsfreiheit – gestern, heute, morgen. Interviews mit Expertinnen und Experten aus Politik und Zivilgesellschaft, Berlin 2021, p. 43, <https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/11055681/Einsatz+f%C3%BCr+Religionsfreiheit+%E2%80%93+gestern%2C+heute%2C+morgen.pdf/093435af-dc12-4917-4843-4884c8f10fd?version=1.2&t=161799333142>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

and liberals need to recognise that conservative policy-making is perfectly legitimate in the democratic space (even in those cases where it is primarily motivated by electoral considerations), the way in which the far-right groups refer to religious freedom is no longer “conservative,” but in stark contrast to core ideas of the human rights approach. Looking at speeches, motions, social media and website posts and publications of the far-right groups and far-right European parties and their representatives, it is striking that religious freedom is repeatedly reinterpreted in a way that undermines its character as a universal right to freedom, and instead the groups attempt to establish their own ideological narratives and enemy stereotypes:

Islam in particular is often made the enemy and bogeyman, and fears of migration are exploited for constructing a scenario of intimidation, often echoing conspiracy theories. The far-right group ID describes the protection of what it defines as national identities against an alleged islamisation as one of its key priorities:

“The ID Group aims to safeguard the identity of the citizens and nations in Europe. The right to control, regulate and limit immigration is a fundamental principle shared by the Members of the Group. So is their willingness to fight for a safer Europe with well-protected external borders and a stronger cooperation to tackle terrorism and islamisation. The Members unequivocally oppose the possible accession of Turkey.”¹⁶

In even more drastic terms, this alleged threat was described in 2019 by Giorgia Meloni, who has been the president of the ECR party since 2020 and has represented Italy in the European Council as head of government since 2022:¹⁷

“If the Muslims think they are bringing holy war into our home, the time has come to take even drastic measures: all that remains is to block any kind of Islamic immigration until they have clarified their ideas. We intend to

16 Statutes of the Identity and Democracy (ID) Group in den European Parliament, https://assets.nationbuilder.com/idgroup/pages/54/attachments/original/1673443377/NEW_ID_Statutes__EN_11.2022.pdf?1673443377, accessed on: 18 Oct. 2023.

17 Quotes that have not been published in English have been translated into English by the authors of the chapter.

defend our classical and Christian roots from the process of the Islamisation of Europe, let the do-gooders and sultans of half the world get used to it.”¹⁸

While the ID group portrays Islam as a threat, they describe the “Greek-Roman and Christian heritage as the pillars of European civilization”¹⁹:

“The Europe of today needs a return to the values of its identity and Judeo-Christian roots, which are constantly threatened by widening Islamisation. The lack of clarity of relations with nations such as Turkey, as well as uncontrolled illegal immigration, contributes to destroying EU cooperation and the stability of our Member States.”²⁰

Some far-right representatives not only postulate the danger of growing Christianophobia but already speak of “persecution of Christians in the European Union,” such as the Polish ECR MEP Bogdan Rzońca in a question to the European Commission from 2020.²¹

Moreover, it is argued that the alleged islamisation is a threat to religious freedom and other human rights. A typical example is provided by the wording of an ID group motion proposing an alternative resolution text for the 2020 EU Strategy for Gender Equality, in which ID condemns “mass migration and the ensuing attempts at the Islamisation of Europe as a threat to our security and an attack on religious freedom and women’s rights.”²²

18 Giorgia Meloni: Se i musulmani pensano di portare la guerra santa in casa nostra, è arrivato il momento di prendere provvedimenti anche drastici (23 Apr. 2019), <https://www.facebook.com/giorgiameloni.paginaufficiale/posts/pfbidoH5Yemf3ubpZBW5uZ6ZzbAjhzyYXenKvrwssQUQU2BnZezS8cn6DmVCpv5p5h83UDI>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023; for a summary of other similar statements by Meloni, see Bridge Initiative Team: Factsheet: Giorgia Meloni (2 Feb. 2023), <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-giorgia-meloni/>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

19 Statutes of the Identity and Democracy (ID) Group in den European Parliament.

20 The Parliament: “La rentrée: Marco Zanni says it’s time for change” (18 Sep. 2020), <https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/time-for-change>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

21 European Parliament. Parliamentary question: Persecution of Christians in the European Union (6 Apr. 2020), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/P-9-2020-002116_EN.html, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

22 European Parliament: European Parliament resolution on the EU Strategy for Gender Equality (13 Jan. 2021), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0234-AM-001-001_EN.pdf, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

The far-right presents itself as the only force that takes these alleged threats seriously and stands up for religious freedom and the protection of persecuted Christians and fights against Christianophobia, in Europe as well as worldwide. This claim is underlined by symbolic gestures, whereby the nomination of the Archbishop of Mosul Najeeb Michael for the Sakharov Prize 2020 by the ID group should also be interpreted in this sense. At the ID group's press conference on the nomination, it is noticeable that the ID representatives hardly respond in their speeches to the Archbishop's solution-oriented analysis, which emphasises the importance of interfaith cooperation, dialogue, peaceful coexistence, mutual respect and the language of the heart, and instead try to foreground the issue of defending Christian identity against radical Islamism, a theme that fits much better with their propagated worldview.²³

On the other hand, political opponents are accused of inaction or even complicity. ECR MEP Carlo Fidanza – chair of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance – accused the EU of being a “soulless bureaucratic giant plagued by the worst cultural relativism” suggesting that its lack of commitment to religious freedom was a “submission to Islamic fanaticism.”²⁴ In the process, the far-right likes to present itself as the voice of the silent majority: “We, however, will continue to fight to protect the silent majority.”²⁵ Especially “leftists,” “liberals” and “globalists” are sharply attacked, with “multiculturalism,” “woke ideology,” “cancel culture” and similar inciting buzzwords being used to construct a further enemy image and a further

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- 23 European Parliament, Multimedia Centre: Press conference by Marco Zanni, I&D President, Nicolas Bay, Thierry Mariani, Jérôme Riviére, Joachim Kuhs, and Najeeb Michael, on ‘Archbishop of Mosul Najeeb Michael Moussa, nominated for the Sakharov prize 2020’ (6 Oct. 2020), https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/de/webs-treaming/press-conference-by-marco-zanni-i-d-president-nicolas-bay-thierry-mariani-jerome-riviere-joachim-kuh_20201006-1400-SPECIAL-PRESSER, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.
- 24 European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) – Fratelli d'Italia: Europa senz'anima, Von der Leyen non difende liberta' religiosa (24 Jun. 2023), <https://ecr-fratelliditalia.eu/europa-senzanima-von-der-leyen-non-difende-liberta-religiosa/>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.
- 25 Identity and Democracy Group: Plenary Booklet, Identity and Democracy, 2–5 May 2022, Plenary Session, p. 5, https://www.idgroup.eu/2_5_may, accessed on: 4 Sep. 2023.

alleged threat.²⁶ The Finnish ID MEP Laura Huhtasaari even includes the term “climate change” in this list and sketches some kind of alleged liberal re-education that endangers Christian traditions:

“The hegemony prevailing in the EU sees increasing multiculturalism as an intrinsic value. At the same time, it wants to reduce the importance of Christianity. Christian traditions, such as Christmas celebrations, are being driven out of schools. Liberal politicians have become allergic to the message of Christianity. Liberals want to change the message of the church to match their political ideology, that is climate change and the rainbow idea. This is all done in the name of tolerance. Christ is not tolerated, but the spread of Islam is seen as a progressive and miraculous thing.”²⁷

In particular, the ECR group perceives “family values” as being threatened by a corresponding “ideological monopoly of the left,” which is why the group has set up a working group to counter it.²⁸ Already in 2019, the future ECR party president Meloni warned at the World Congress of Families that the family was allegedly being made the enemy and that national, religious, gender and family identities were under attack.²⁹

The patterns observed are the same patterns of populist appropriation and reinterpretation that have already been discussed in other contributions to this book: religious freedom is interpreted in a clientelistic way. The religious is often reduced to a role as a source of tradition and identity. Objectives that

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- 26 See e.g. Angeli, Matteo: “The National Rally’s anti-woke gamble” (1 May 2023), <http://ytali.com/2023/05/01/the-national-rallys-anti-woke-gamble/>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023; Independent: “How a far-right politician could become Italy’s first female leader” (17 Sep. 2022), https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/italy-prime-minister-far-right-giorgia-meloni-salvini-b2166887.html, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.
- 27 Identity and Democracy Group: Plenary Booklet, Identity and Democracy, 12–15 Dec. 2022, p. 8, https://www.idgroup.eu/12_15_december, accessed on: 4 Sep. 2023.
- 28 European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR): New ECR Policy Working Group on Family and Life launched (30 Mar. 2022), https://ecrgroup.eu/article/new_ecr_policy_working_group_on_family_and_life_launched, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.
- 29 Bump, Philip: “That Giorgia Meloni speech captivating the U.S. right doesn’t make sense” (27 Sep. 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/09/27/meloni-italy-united-states-far-right/>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023; Cassius: Giorgia Meloni’s electrifying speech at the World Congress of Families, English subtitles (17 Apr. 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_Z1LClnhsk, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

are legitimate or even worthy of support when considered in isolation (combating Islamist violence, supporting families, cultivating customs and traditions, protecting religious freedom and women's rights, and helping Christians in need) are mixed with problematic ideological or conspiracy-theoretical narratives and demands for discriminatory measures that disproportionately restrict human rights. By generalising, exaggerating, insinuating, coining ideological inciting buzzwords, fuelling culture war debates, omitting important contextual information or even citing unsubstantiated or even false allegations, a scenario of intimidation is constructed and fear, hatred and prejudice are stoked. Against this alleged threat, the far-right in turn stages itself as the one and only saviour representing the true voice of the people, while political opponents are denied legitimacy and dissenting views are portrayed as complicit with the threat.

The examples presented above are only a small selection. Corresponding narratives can also be found among other representatives and member parties of ID and ECR. It becomes evident that they are an internationally unifying element of the far-right forces in Europe, which runs like a thread through their argumentation, sometimes in a moderate form, with a subtle choice of words, sometimes in a more radical form. It may seem like a paradox that nationalists in particular are very well networked transnationally. However, the EU offers them a welcome projection surface to bundle hatred and thus to advance national political goals and the international network an opportunity to learn about successful populist strategies of others and to further refine ideological narratives.

Cherry-picking approaches towards FoRB across all political groups

Studying speeches³⁰ and amendments³¹ from the parliamentary work and the websites of the political groups represented in the European Parliament, it becomes apparent that the other groups also have certain focal points when referring to FoRB, even if – unlike the far-right – they do not focus on inhuman ideologies or conspiracy-theoretical views:

- For instance, the EPP group is particularly committed to Christians in need.
- Alongside a commitment to religious pluralism and inter-religious dialogue, the S&D group has a particular focus on the connection between labour issues and FoRB.
- In line with its anti-imperialist orientation, the GUE/NGL group resorts to anti-colonialist criticism.
- In several contributions, Renew focuses on the fight against Islamist extremism, matching the line of French President Macron's party, the member party of Renew, which has the largest delegation of MEPs in the group.

30 For the current parliamentary term from 2019 to 2024, the database of the European Parliament lists a total of 38 verbatim reports of proceedings in the category “Debates and Videos” for the search terms “freedom of religion,” “religious freedom,” “Islamophobia” and “persecuted Christians” until the summer recess 2023 (setting: word(s): in text): <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/debates-video.html>.

These included the following debates focussing in a general way, without a specific country focus, on issues related to FoRB: 10th anniversary of the EU Guidelines on Freedom of Religion or Belief (debate); The 30th anniversary of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities; The EU's actions in the field of freedom of religion or belief worldwide (debate); Persecution of minorities on the grounds of belief or religion (short presentation); The European Commission Guidelines on inclusive language (topical debate). By contrast, about two-thirds of the debates dealt with the human rights situation in specific countries, with FoRB being a focal topic in about half of the discussions and appearing sporadically in individual contributions in the other half.

31 For instance, there was a particularly intensive discussion in the Committee on Foreign Affairs and numerous amendments to the report on the persecution of minorities on the grounds of belief or religion (2021/2055(INI)), for which Karol Karski from the ECR group was the rapporteur: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0071_EN.html, accessed on: 4 Sep. 2023.

- The Greens/EFA stays largely out of debates that deal with general issues around FoRB. However, the group and its representatives get involved when it comes to concrete cases of human rights violations. In such cases, they also courageously stand up for religious human rights defenders.

Ideological lines – especially at the political fringes – can also be discerned when comparing which governments are criticised by which groups. For instance, it is noteworthy that the ID group holds back on criticising the Indian government under the leadership of the Hindu nationalist BJP party even when the discussion focuses on human rights violations against Christian minorities.³² On the other hand, GUE/NGL and its representatives are often very reluctant to criticise self-declared communist or socialist governments such as Nicaragua³³ or China,³⁴ or even relativise their human rights violations in a form of “whataboutism” with reference to the West’s own failings.

In general, there is often a tendency to divide into a “right-wing” and a “left-wing” camp:

- The (centre)left and liberals are often more secularly oriented, while the centre-right and far-right often emphasise the importance of Europe’s Christian heritage.
- The centre-right and far-right particularly often call for a stronger commitment to supporting Christians in need. On the other hand, the problem of Islamophobia is more likely to be taken up by left-wing representatives (even if much less frequently than the aforementioned).
- For left-wing and green representatives, it is an important concern that FoRB should not be used to undermine LGBTIQ rights and access to abortion. By contrast, quite a few far-right representatives portray a supposed woke culture as a threat to their identity and religious freedom.

32 European Parliament: Verbatim report of proceedings (12 Jul. 2023), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2023-07-12-ITM-021-02_EN.html, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

33 European Parliament: Verbatim report of proceedings (14 Sep. 2022), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2022-09-14-ITM-015-03_EN.html, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

34 European Parliament: Verbatim report of proceedings (18 Dec. 2019), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2019-12-18-ITM-019_EN.html, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

- Leftist and green representatives seem to prefer a stronger general commitment to human rights instead of a specific commitment to religious freedom. On the other hand, (centre)right representatives often place a special focus on religious freedom (and especially that of Christians) even when discussing cases where multiple human rights are violated.
- Left-wing MEPs point to problems resulting from the colonial heritage, while far-right MEPs often focus on European self-interest and the role of the EU as a financial donor. One ID MEP even praises the French colonial rule in Algeria as a time of religious tolerance.³⁵

Conclusions and recommendations

Such polarisation tendencies run the risk of weakening and marginalising the political centre. Indeed, regarding the promotion of FoRB, stronger bridges between the centre-left and the centre-right would be desirable. Thereby, the following aspects hold particular importance:

- For the EPP group, the tendency to split into a left-wing and right-wing camp poses the challenge of an appropriate demarcation from the far-right. In fact, this demarcation is fragile, especially regarding the ECR group. At times, the two groups even have cooperative events on topics related to religious freedom.³⁶ This openness may be rooted in the fact that the ECR group at least partly presents itself more moderately and less aggressively in parliament than the ID group and actually started out as a genuinely conservative group. However, especially against the background of Brexit, the group has increasingly opened up to the right and admitted parties that are considered post-fascist, right-wing populist or even far-right extremist.³⁷ Particularly due to the parallels with ID in

35 European Parliament: Verbatim report of proceedings (28 Nov. 2019), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2019-11-28-ITM-003-01_EN.html, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

36 See e.g. European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR): Conference & Exhibition: Suffering Christians in Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere (18 Sep. 2023), https://ecrgroup.eu/event/conference_exhibition_suffering_christians_in_sub_saharan_africa_and_elsewh, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

37 Noteworthy in this context is also the change of the Dutch party ChristenUnie from the ECR to the EPP group for this reason: ChristenUnie: Segers (ChristenUnie): 'Coalitie

terms of content and framing outlined above, the ECR group remains a problematic partner, especially when it comes to questions of religious freedom.

- On the other hand, for greens, leftists and social democrats (especially secular-oriented ones), the challenge is not to be seduced into distancing themselves from dealing with religion-related issues and underestimating their relevance in the shadow of the polarisation fuelled by the far-right. On the contrary, it is crucial to discover FoRB in its fundamental character as a *human* right and universal right to freedom, thus leaving no room for populist distortions of the right. In order to avoid making themselves vulnerable to criticism, they would also be well advised to take note of which rights are actually codified in the central human rights documents; for example regarding an alleged human right to abortion.³⁸

If the democratic forces within society and politics dare to engage in a sincere exchange, there is the potential that the diverse approaches to FoRB do not have to lead to isolated particular interests, but that with the help of the different expertises, even synergies can be discovered. For instance, regarding the question of how religious women – who are often affected by multiple human rights violations – can be supported, an exchange between religious conservatives and progressive feminists could be fruitful.

met Forum niet geloofwaardig' (6 Mar. 2020), <https://www.christenunie.nl/blog/2020/03/06/Segers-ChristenUnie-Coalitie-met-Forum-niet-geloofwaardig>, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023

38 See also Deutsche Kommission Justitia et Pax: Menschenrechte und kulturelle Traditionen – Grundsatzreflexion und „Testfall“ Recht auf Gesundheit. Erkenntnisse der Arbeitsgruppe „Menschenrechte“ der Deutschen Kommission Justitia et Pax (= Gerechtigkeit und Frieden 139), p. 35, p. 42, http://justitia-et-pax.de/jp/publikationen/pdf/guf_139.pdf, accessed on: 17 Oct. 2023.

Signs of Hope and Proposals for Solutions

International Religious Freedom (or Belief) Alliance

From Populist to not yet Popular

Jos Douma

Under the title “Protecting Human Rights from Exclusionary Populism,” Harvard’s Gerald Neuman contributed to a 2023 publication, concluding his contribution¹ with some critical paragraphs on the International Religious Freedom (or Belief) Alliance.

“The Trump administration also established a so-called International Religious Freedom (or Belief) Alliance, enlisting primarily right-wing populist governments such as Hungary, Poland, and Brazil. The Alliance enabled religiously intolerant governments to claim attachment to religious liberty by protesting persecution of their own coreligionists, and to argue for the supremacy of religious freedom over the human rights of women and sexual minorities. The new administration has continued in the Alliance, providing its Secretariat in the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom and leading one of its working groups (on threats posed by technology). The United States could resign from the Alliance, but it should consider expanding and reforming it. Rights-respecting countries reluctant to join a project of Mike Pompeo might be willing to contribute to a genuinely evenhanded approach to religious freedom that is recalibrated to be consistent with the human rights of all. Actual religious persecution is definitely a serious problem in the world, and a diverse group of governments willing to help enforce existing international standards could decrease it – particularly if they are sufficiently diverse and committed to examining their own failings as well as those of others. A reconfigured alliance could support the

1 Neuman, Gerald: “Protecting Human Rights from Exclusionary Populism,” in: Christopher Sabatini (ed.), *Reclaiming Human Rights in a Changing World Order*, Washington D. C./London: Brookings Institution 2023, pp. 123–148, pp. 141–142.

work of existing human rights mechanisms rather than attempting to undermine or replace them. Domestically, the effort might also draw some religious constituencies back toward shared values and away from populist divisiveness. The problem of participation in the Alliance illustrates a disadvantage of convening states as admitted members in a standing organization to address the challenges of populism. Membership becomes a credential that may be undeserved from the outset and that is politically very difficult to withdraw, even after changes in a member's government."

I will try to respond to the challenge that Neuman presented based on my own experience as the Netherlands' representative between February 2020 and September 2022, as a member of the Steering Committee over the same period and chair in 2021. I will refer to publicly available documentation published until March 2023 and take not into account developments since. Please accept that I cannot reveal a number of details in national decision-making nor bilateral consultations. Moreover, I also will not quote from International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (IRFBA) documentation not published on IRFBA's webpage, hosted by the United States (U.S.) Department of State.

The alliance

IRFBA is "a network of like-minded countries fully committed to advancing freedom of religion or belief around the world."² According to the website – hosted by the U.S. Department of State – 37 countries have joined the alliance. There are also five IRFBA friends, and three IRFBA observers, including the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The idea for an alliance

In July 2018 and 2019, the U.S. Department of State hosted two ministerials to advance religious freedom. In the margins of the second meeting, the U.S. hosts announced their initiative to build an "International Religious Freedom

2 U.S. Department of State: International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-or-belief-alliance/>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

Alliance³. A number of invited partners – such as members of the International Contact Group (ICG) on FoRB – were critical for a number of reasons:

A concept of the Trump administration

For some European countries leading on the issue of FoRB, associating with this “Trump thing”⁴ was a risky affair. At the 2019 ministerial, both secretary of state Pompeo and IRF ambassador Brownback referred to “protecting a common, *unalienable* human right” and Secretary Pompeo announced the establishment of the “Commission on Unalienable Rights.”⁵ He had presented the plan in an article in the Wall Street Journal a week before the ministerial and claimed that “[h]uman-rights advocacy has lost its bearings and become more of an industry than a moral compass.”⁶

Against the backdrop of earlier Trump administration initiatives (like the “Mexico City Policy”⁷ and the instrumentalization of religion⁸), this raised suspicion that was justified when the Commission started its discussions, held hearings and presented its report.⁹

3 Banks, Adelle M.: “As religious freedom summit ends, State Department announces new alliance, sanctions” (18 Jul. 2019), <https://religionnews.com/2019/07/18/as-religious-freedom-summit-ends-state-department-announces-new-alliance-sanctions/>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

4 An expression used later by an anonymous Biden administration staff member.

5 U.S. Department of State: 2019 Ministerial To Advance Religious Freedom, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/2019-ministerial-to-advance-religious-freedom/index.html>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023; italics by the author.

6 U.S. Department of State: Unalienable Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy: The Founders’ Principles Can Help Revitalize Liberal Democracy World-wide (7 Jul. 2019), <https://2017-2021.state.gov/unalienable-rights-and-u-s-foreign-policy-the-founders-principles-can-help-revitalize-liberal-democracy-world-wide/index.html>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

7 Hellmann, Jessie: “Trump reinstates ban on US funding for abortion overseas” in: (23 Jan. 2017), <https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/abortion/315652-trump-signs-executive-order-reinstating-global-gag-rule-on/>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

8 Casey, Shaun: “How the State Department Has Sidelined Religion’s Role in Diplomacy” (5 Sep. 2017), <https://religionandpolitics.org/2017/09/05/how-the-state-department-has-sidelined-religions-role-in-diplomacy/>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

9 U.S. Department of State: Commission on Unalienable Rights, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/commission-on-unalienable-rights/index.html>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

The International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief

This forum – comprising senior policy officers of nearly 30 like-minded countries – was established by Canada in June 2015 to encourage and deepen coordination between countries committed to advancing FoRB for all. The contact group is co-chaired by Canada and the United States.¹⁰ While it was mentioned in the Potomac Plan of Action (a result of the 2018 ministerial) to “support collective action”¹¹, it now seemed to become sidelined by an initiative of the principals of one of the co-chairs.

IRF instead of FoRB

The difference between the U.S. acronym IRF and the UN/EU acronym FoRB warrants some background details to better understand European resistance. In 1998, the U.S. enacted an International Religious Freedom Act, implying a wide range of statutory institutions and obligations such as a bipartisan Commission (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom – USCIRF), an ambassador-at-large, and an annual report by the Department of State. The 2016 Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act amended the 1998 Act by specifically extending protection to non-theists, as those who do not claim any particular religion.

The freedom not to believe was expressed explicitly in the 2018 Potomac Declaration: “Every person has the right to hold any faith or belief, *or none at all*, and enjoys the freedom to change faith.”¹² However, political, oral, language was less clear, like in the statements by secretary Pompeo and ambassador Brownback at the Washington Ministerial in 2019. Against the backdrop of the distrust of especially western-European partners and the tradition in

10 Government of Canada: International Contact Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief (31 Aug. 2023), https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/human_rights-droits_homme/freedom-religion-liberte-groupe_groupe.aspx?lang=eng, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

11 See under “Strengthening the Response” at U.S. Department of State: Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom Potomac Plan of Action, <https://www.state.gov/ministerial-to-advance-religious-freedom-potomac-plan-of-action/>, accessed on: 26 Oct. 2023.

12 U.S. Department of State: Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom Potomac Declaration, <https://www.state.gov/ministerial-to-advance-religious-freedom-potomac-declaration/>, accessed on: 26 Oct. 2023; italics by the author.

Europe to explicitly include “belief” or “faith” in all expressions, this ambiguity made partners critical of an IRF alliance.

Technical, language and legal aspects

When ambassador Brownback solicited for support while visiting the Hague in November 2019 and addressing a meeting of the ICG on FoRB (co-chaired by the architect of his plan), he held a passionate plea for “action by senior politicians, based on consensus.” With the IRF Act dating over 20 years, he wanted to “get into action, call people mandated to act.” Although his audience was sympathetic to this personal ambition, he somewhat received a cold shoulder. Delegates made a number of comments on the issues mentioned above and raised questions about the risk of undermining the multilateral system, the relationship with internationally agreed language and intersectionality with (wider) human rights. Apart from that, partners were critical on technical issues, financing and governance. None of the ICG members committed to the plan.

Eliminating misconceptions, changing principles

Brownback now mandated his staff to negotiate with a number of partners – notably Canada, Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and The United Kingdom (UK) – to generate support and accommodate partners’ insights. Countries like Germany, France and Italy and the EU’s European External Action Service (EEAS) did not participate but were informed by the others.

Knox Thames and his team could not easily overcome the mistrust against perceived Trump administration objectives but could at least clear the sky as much as the language. The small group of ICG-FoRB partners mentioned – advised by the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, Dr. Ahmed Shaheed – were able to change the text and spirit of the IRFA principles, leading to a Declaration of Principles published on February 5, 2020, when secretary Pompeo officially launched the alliance with an initial membership of 27 countries.¹³ The

13 Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Colombia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Gambia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Senegal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Togo, Ukraine, United Kingdom and United States. (Banks, Adelle M.: “More than two dozen countries

UK and the Netherlands joined – “in good company” – whereas Canada, Denmark, Norway and Sweden delayed a decision.

Sound principles of the alliance

When reading the principles, one may notice the influence of European thinking and adaptation to multilateralism. The UN Special Rapporteur and European partners underlined: “The actions of the alliance are intended to complement existing work to promote freedom of religion or belief within the United Nations and other competent multilateral and regional organizations.”¹⁴

Brownback presented the IRFA “as more a network than an alliance, with consensual decision taking and not meant to take sanctions,” adding that there is “a pretty high bar” for countries included in the group: “We want nations that respect religious freedom in their own country, obviously act that way, and then are willing to push religious freedom in international venues.”¹⁵ Brownback’s “pretty high bar” triggered expectations and comments such as those by Humanists UK: “The ‘Declaration of Principles’ of the Alliance in some places uses religiously exclusive language (much as does the Alliance’s name), but in many places is inclusive of the non-religious [...] Some members of the Alliance include strong defenders of freedom of religion or belief, such as the Netherlands, but also countries with regressive human rights records, such as Brazil, Hungary, and Poland.”¹⁶

The members’ commitments are very ambitious indeed, like upholding their state obligations under international law in general, being inclusive, including cross-regional engagement and being committed to pursuing internal-external coherence on matters relating to FoRB. They also commit to

launch new religious freedom alliance” [6 Feb. 2020], <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/02/06/more-two-dozen-countries-launch-new-religious-freedom-alliance>, accessed on: 29. Aug. 2023.)

14 U.S. Department of State: Declaration of Principles for the International Religious Freedom Alliance (5 Feb. 2020), <https://www.state.gov/declaration-of-principles-for-the-international-religious-freedom-alliance/>, accessed on: 29. Aug. 2023.

15 Banks: Two dozen.

16 Humanists UK: UK signs up to US-led ‘International Religious Freedom Alliance’ (6 Feb. 2020), <https://humanists.uk/2020/02/06/uk-signs-up-to-us-led-international-religious-freedom-alliance/>, accessed on: 29. Aug. 2023.

taking “a human rights-based approach” to advancing FoRB (essential for European partners and the UN Special Rapporteur), and promote other human rights that are indispensable for the full enjoyment of the freedom of religion or belief.

Moreover, IRFA members should also feel confronted: in a number of founding member states, *registration* is an issue as well as the *intersectionality*, with both being perceived as leading to exclusion and the conflicting implementation of human rights.

Putting words into practice

From the outset, Brownback surrounded himself as chair with trusted partners, inviting the Brazilian, Netherlands and UK representatives to join the Steering Committee and creating an Informal Council of Experts of renowned experts and trusted IRF friends.¹⁷ In early March 2020, a first working meeting took place in Geneva, elaborating the Declaration of Principles and the work agenda. That meeting was held *back to back* with the regular meeting of the ICG on FoRB, and in the margins of the regular session of the UN Human Rights Council. IRFA members briefed their ICG friends and discussed prospects for membership with Canada, Denmark, Norway and Sweden and discussed the option of becoming a “friend” at least.

From then, IRFA started meeting on a monthly basis, including virtually due to Covid. Since ambassador Brownback had shown that he was prepared to also adopt the “B” in the alliance’s name, Denmark was easily able to join in mid-2020 when the name was changed into the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. Norway followed slightly later.

At the Geneva meeting, the Netherlands – connecting to a suggestion of Kosovo at IRFA’s launch, and supported by Gambia in Geneva – proposed discussing the nexus “Gender and FoRB.” The Dutch initiative built on a Danish-Norwegian initiated report “Promoting FoRB and Gender Equality in the Con-

17 The Steering Committee members were João Lucas Quental Novaes de Almeida, minister in the Brazilian Foreign ministry (until summer 2023); Jos Douma, the Netherlands Special Envoy for Religion and Belief (until mid-2022); and Rehman Chishty, MP and the PM’s Special Envoy on Religion or Belief (until mid-September 2020). The composition of the Informal Council of Experts is never formally disclosed.

text of the SDGs,” presented in the margins of the UN Human Rights Council.¹⁸ While still a friend of IRFA and prior to joining the alliance, Denmark took the initiative to lead the workgroup. The group regularly briefed the plenary meetings and drafted relevant parts of the joint statements at the Ministers’ Forums in 2020 and 2021, and a specific statement for the London FoRB Ministerial in July 2022.

Estonia led the “Protecting Religious Sites Workgroup,” preparing a statement on the protection of places of worship. It was adopted at the Ministers’ Forum in November 2020.¹⁹ The subject had received attention in special sessions ever since, including in a statement issued at the London Ministerial in July 2022.²⁰

Shortly after the launch of the alliance, Australia joined it, represented by its ambassador in Washington. Ambassador Sinodinos joined the Steering Committee and presented the idea to study the abolishment of the death penalty for blasphemy and apostasy. The discussions in the Australia-led workgroup resulted in a report prepared by external experts and supported by members of the workgroup named “Killing in the Name of God,” published in autumn 2021. It inspired the civil society organization (CSO) Jubilee Campaign to start a lobby for amending the UN resolution on a moratorium on the use of the death penalty, due in November 2022. IRFBA members were not effective in supporting this lobbying in the preparatory process, but eventually eighteen IRFBA members released a well-documented statement to support

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- 18 Petersen, Marie Juul: Promoting freedom of religion or belief and gender equality in the context of the sustainable development goals: A focus on access to justice, education and health. Reflections from the 2019 expert consultation process, Copenhagen: The Danish Institute for Human Rights 2020, https://www.humanrights.dk/sites/humanrights.dk/files/media/document/_%2019_02922-22%20ofreedom_of_religion_or_belief_gender_equality_and_the_sustainable_development_%20ofd%20487747_1_1.PDF, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.
- 19 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Estonia: International religious freedom alliance adopts an Estonia-led Declaration on Safe Places of Worship (8 Nov. 2020), <https://vm.ee/en/news/international-religious-freedom-alliance-adopts-estonia-led-declaration-safe-places-worship>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.
- 20 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, United Kingdom: Statement on freedom of religion or belief and cultural heritage (7 Jul. 2022), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-cultural-heritage-statement-at-the-international-ministerial-conference-2022/statement-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-cultural-heritage>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

the initiative, just before the UN General Assembly (UNGA) Third Committee cast a vote.²¹

At the launching dinner, the Foreign Minister of Togo suggested an initiative for an African vision for FoRB. It was worked out by Togolese diplomats and U.S. experts, supported by some members of the Steering Committee and Council of Experts. They developed a stimulating concept note, with a view to garner wide African support for FoRB before the 2063 jubilee of the African Union. This is yet to be followed up. Other workgroups such as those on education, humanitarian aid and technology were less productive yet.

In November 2020, the first annual meeting took place, called the Ministers' Forum and held in the margins of the (virtual) Warsaw Ministerial to Advance FoRB.²² The collective IRFBA statement – adopted by consensus – offers useful insight into aspirations, work programs and accomplishments,²³ as does the statement of the (also virtual) 2021 Ministers' Forum.²⁴ Some ambitions such as taking country action as a group regrettably proved too far-fetched.

In every respect, it was clear that the IRFBA was a US-driven entity, but already under Brownback's chairmanship the monthly meetings had a structure and climate facilitating a true and open discussion. Active participants learned to cooperate, exchange information and stimulate coordinated – if not common – action. However, it also became clear that the IRFBA was not very different from other international alliances and coalitions, in the sense that only a small number of participants were active, as shown by participation in so-called deep dives (closed-door discussions on topics and country issues) and

21 U.S. Department of State: IRFBA Statement on Blasphemy and Related Offences (7 Nov. 2022), <https://www.state.gov/irfba-statement-on-blasphemy-and-related-offences/>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

22 Please note that this ministerial was held to advance FoRB and no longer IRF. For more details, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Poland: Ministerial to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief 2020, <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/FORB2020>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

23 U.S. Department of State: A Shared Vision for Advancing Freedom of Religion or Belief for All (17 Nov. 2020), <https://2017-2021.state.gov/a-shared-vision-for-advancing-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-for-all/index.html>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

24 U.S. Department of State: Statement from the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance Ministers' Forum (23 Nov. 2021), <https://www.state.gov/statement-from-the-international-religious-freedom-or-belief-alliance-ministers-forum/>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

Twitter campaigns. Some Twitter campaigns like those by the U.S., UK and Netherlands (supported by Canada and Sweden) on the plight of Bahá'ís in Iran and another one to support the leader of the Nigerian humanists attracted considerable attention.

Consolidation and striving for effectiveness

As a consequence of the U.S. presidential elections in November 2020, Ambassador Brownback stepped back as chair in January 2021 and was replaced by the Netherlands Special Envoy.²⁵ The Dutch chair – strongly supported by the secretariat in the Office of International Religious Freedom in the Department of State – consolidated the alliance. By Summer 2021, a set of rules and procedures has been adopted and implemented.

Apart from structuring the alliance as a body, the Dutch chair also invested in honoring the commitments. *Internal-external coherence* was placed on the agenda by asking one member to describe internal issues by responding to the fact that it was listed in the 2021 Open Doors' World Watch List. The member made a presentation and entered into discussion, but also protested – supported by others – against the introduction of peer reviews.

The chair also involved the Council of Experts in placing “current issues” on the agenda, hoping that a discussion would lead to coordinated action to *challenge persistent violations and abuses*. Supported by the new UK Envoy Fiona Bruce MP, the chair and secretariat increased the frequency of group statements.

IRFBA has added value to many member states' activities on FoRB. Even during the Covid period, when it only met virtually, IRFBA facilitated member states representatives to *familiarize* themselves with issues and colleagues. Initiatives like the Estonian-led declaration on religious sites offered members confronted with actual conflicts and/or legacies of war and occupation an opportunity to make their plight heard and recognized. Moreover, the Togolese initiative for an African view on FoRB – for instance – generated a lively dis-

25 Since Rehman Chishty had stepped down as the UK Envoy, the vice chair was vacant and taken by Australia. Chishty's successor as PM's Special Envoy – Fiona Bruce – joined the Steering Committee, as well as the Director of the IRF Office in the State Department, Dan Nadel (since no new IRF Ambassador had been nominated yet). João Lucas Quental Novaes de Almeida stayed on for Brazil.

cussion in the Council of Experts – but not among member states – on the importance of *tradition* when propagating and defending FoRB.

After taking over as chair as of January 2022, the UK PM's Envoy for FoRB invested in involving members, enlarging the alliance, preparing the London Ministerial in July 2022 and intensifying cooperation with the Council of Experts. Furthermore, there was the first country visit (Algeria) for an IRFBA chair. In March and November 2022 and March 2023, the chair profited from the relaxing of Covid measures to host physical meetings again in Geneva in the margins of the UN Human Rights Council session, and in New York in the margins of the Third Committee meetings.

IRFBA is “consensual” and “voluntary,” with all positive and negative consequences. Given the capacity of many of the members’ Ministries of Foreign Affairs,²⁶ it was to be expected that only a limited number of member states’ representatives intervene in IRFBA meetings and/or contribute to statements. Nonetheless, IRFBA still falls short of ambassador Brownback’s ambition to “*get into action, call people mandated to act.*”

A striking example is a statement made in December 2021 on the situation of Jehovah’s Witnesses.²⁷ Only twelve member states supported the statement – the lowest score between all the statements made – whereas no reference was made to any specific country and the text was strict rights-oriented.

Similarly, the alliance and its members fail to follow up the statements made. As Knox Thames wrote: “the challenge is ensuring these efforts move beyond statements to consequential diplomacy that prompts change on the ground for the persecuted.”²⁸ Only in one particular case was sound follow-up noticed. Many IRFBA members supported a UK-initiated statement on Afghanistan in September 2021²⁹ and – although the details escaped public attention – the U.S. and Brazil have cooperated since then in facilitating mem-

26 As one member put it: “How can I ask for support for a statement on Myanmar when we don’t have an embassy over there and a small regional department?”

27 U.S. Department of State: Statement on Jehovah’s Witnesses (17 Dec. 2021), <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-or-belief-alliance-statement-on-jehovahs-witnesses/>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

28 Thames, Knox: Five Predictions for 2022 (31 Dec. 2021), <https://www.knoxthames.com/post/five-predictions-for-2022>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

29 U.S. Department of State: International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance Statement on Afghanistan (10 Sep. 2021), <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-or-belief-alliance-statement-on-afghanistan/>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

bers of religious minorities to emigrate from Afghanistan to safe countries, including Brazil.

Since early 2023, most statements are only made by the IRFBA chair. IRFBA's credentials and solidarity were tested seriously in the aftermath of the London Ministerial, when one of the adopted statements on "freedom of religion or belief and gender equality"³⁰ was removed from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) website a few days after the meeting, changed without true consultation of all 22 signatories and posted again with the original date ("updated 7 July"), with a mere eight signatories. The FCDO kept the original preamble, with as its last paragraph: "As such, FoRB serves not only to protect people from discrimination, inequality, and violence; it can also serve as a source of empowerment for those who find inspiration and strength in their convictions to fight for gender equality and justice."

However, by deleting a reference to "discriminatory personal status laws," they undermined a central objective of IRFBA – the freedom for women to choose their religion – and deleting reference to "sexual and reproductive health and rights" and "bodily autonomy" they in effect undermined the image of FoRB, exemplified by the new last sentence: "support and build capacities of local religious and belief leaders."

The FCDO defended its action by stating that "it made the changes in order to focus on core issues and ensure consensus between signatories"³¹ and "to

30 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, United Kingdom: Statement on freedom of religion or belief and gender equality (7 Jul. 2022), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-gender-equality-statement-at-the-international-ministerial-conference-2022/statement-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-gender-equality>, accessed on: 29 Aug. 2023.

31 Davies, Lizzy: "UK under international pressure over deletion of abortion commitments" (22 Jul. 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jul/22/european-countries-pressurise-uk-over-removal-of-abortion-commitments-liz-truss>; Davies, Lizzy: "UK in diplomatic standoff over deletion of abortion rights from gender statement" (28 Jul. 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jul/28/uk-in-diplomatic-standoff-over-deletion-of-abortion-rights-from-gender-statement>. The matter prompted the Guardian to criticize the ministerial at large in a third article, complaining about dignitaries and organizations invited, as if they were there due to their conservative views on certain women's rights: Davies, Lizzy: "UK government honoured anti-abortion figure before editing women's rights statement" (9 Aug. 2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/>

make the final statement more inclusive of all perspectives and views, to allow for a constructive exchange of views on all issues.”³²

Evaluation

Neuman advised the Biden administration not to resign from IRFBA but rather expand and reform the alliance, recalibrated to be consistent with the human rights of all. Reflecting on his comments, some “right-wing populist” governments were indeed eager to join, but – what Neuman calls – “rights-respecting countries” also accepted the invitation after the Trump administration accommodated their wishes and international norms. Therefore, reform and recalibration and the aspiration of a genuinely evenhanded approach to religious freedom started from the date of inception. However, the UK Foreign Secretary’s action after the London Ministerial shows how difficult it is to be consistent in this. IRFBA’s relationship with the wider human rights environment might therefore continue to suffer from “mutual misunderstanding and bias entrenchment.”³³

IRFBA’s history till early 2023 has proven to be a track record of balanced statements, not merely in support of “coreligionists” of certain member states, as Neuman feared. One might wonder why IRFBA did not go further and truly take action. As a consensual network of states with different traditions and priorities, IRFBA’s effectiveness is still limited after three years. Moreover, by studying the series of statements made, one might also question why some governments abstained from a number of statements. Indeed, it is striking that statements from early 2023 have only been issued by the chair.

The ambiguous support for statements, the lack of follow-up, the passive role of quite some members – in particular those from Africa – and the ar-

aug/09/uk-government-award-anti-abortion-figure-sam-brownback-edited-reproductive-rights-statement, all three articles accessed on: 29. Aug. 2023.

- 32 UK Parliament: International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief. Question for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (21 Jul. 2022), <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-07-21/h1992>, accessed on: 27 Aug. 2023.
- 33 A term used by Knox Thames/Peter Mandeville: “Maintaining International Religious Freedom as a Central Tenet of U.S. National Security,” in: United States Institute of Peace no. 513 (2022), p. 7, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/sr_513_international-religious-freedom-us-national-security.pdf, accessed on: 29. Aug. 2023.

ticated position of (members of) the Council of Experts (whose composition is not publicly available) may undermine a balanced diplomatic approach and create the risk of IRFBA not being seen to promote FoRB as a human right but rather as a voice of the Global North, representing Christian interests.

Some member states may have argued for “supremacy” of IRF over other rights – as Neuman feared – but there are no records of them doing so in IRFBA meetings, apart from one or two ministers explicitly referring to only the plight of persecuted Christians. Moreover, I should add that the opposite is also not the case: no member state has ever argued for supremacy of “human rights of women and sexual minorities” over freedom of religion or belief. The principles adopted as of February 5, 2020 and the fruitful cooperation with and participation by the UN Special Rapporteurs on FoRB have proven that IRFBA is fully supportive of the human rights complex and the work of existing human rights mechanisms.

The consecutive chairs have made serious efforts to mind internal-external coherence, but some of the founding members still do not like “examining their own failings as well as those of others,” as Neuman put it. Even more, examining the failings of others is also not welcome by some of those members, as indicated by support for the statements made.

All chairs between 2020 and 2023 attempted an *inclusive approach, including cross-regional engagement*, although expanding proved difficult. IRFBA is still too much of a Global North engagement. The number of states with a Christian majority and/or tradition is far larger than the number of – for instance – Muslim majority countries. The principles and the criteria for membership are a prime hindrance for involving more states in the Global South. The number of countries respecting relevant articles in the ICCPR – subscribing to the 1981 United Nations Declaration – let alone the EU Guidelines on FoRB is limited.

Additionally, some “rights-respecting countries” remain reluctant to join. The European Union – its FoRB Guidelines being mentioned in the Statement of Principles – is sorely missed. This reluctance can be related to the burden of the Trump administration, with persisting fear of undermining or replacing existing human rights mechanisms, or with diverging priorities if not values.

Added value is still to be proven, since coordinated action does not depend on having a wide alliance. The results might also be achieved between (some) individual states and the multilateral structures.³⁴

34 Take – for instance – Uzbekistan, which was a Country of Particular Concern for the U.S. from 2006 until 2017. After a visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, the

Although IRFBA was initially seen by some as threatening the International Contact Group on FoRB, its focus on advocacy has identified perspectives for the ICG to concentrate on FoRB as a human right per se, and for concertation and cooperation in the UN framework. Accordingly, Knox Thames was partly correct when he wrote in the weeks before the 2022 London Ministerial on FoRB: “countries have *strengthened their coordination*” through the IRFBA, which now includes 40 nations. It seems that the issue is finally “*receiving the attention it deserves.*”³⁵

IRFBA’s engagement with independent experts, CSOs and interest groups has built a consensual approach of the defense of FoRB, whereby faith-based organizations among the CSOs respect the human rights framework and shared values, while still propagating their own views. This engagement entails a certain risk of tunnel vision, which no doubt also exists in other plurilateral alliances and coalitions, like the Media Freedom Coalition, the Freedom Online Coalition and the Equal Rights Coalition.

However, even if IRFBA shares this risk with other plurilateral alliances where governments work closely together with CSOs and interest groups, IRFBA’s relationship with the wider human rights environment might still continue to suffer from “mutual misunderstanding and bias entrenchment”³⁶ due to its populist beginning.

country was listed on the Watch List in 2018 and 2019 and struck from that list in 2020, determining that it no longer engaged in or tolerated “severe violations of religious freedom.”

35 Thames, Knox: The London Blueprint for Progress (3 Jul. 2022), <https://www.knoxthames.com/post/blueprint-for-progress>, accessed on: 29. Aug. 2023; italics by the author.

36 Knox: Maintaining International, p. 7.

Populism in the Land of Equality

Cross-Party Consensus in the Face of Extremism

Jorunn Økland

In many European countries, right-wing populist forces are currently trying to claim ownership of issues such as religious freedom and “Christian (family) values.” The idea seems to be that open democracy places Christianity under threat. The detachment from the context of human rights and discussions of how we can live together peacefully in multi-religious societies with shared common ground in discourse and law blurs the concepts of freedom and democracy.

However, in the case of Norway, it can be observed that neither the topics of “religious freedom” nor “gender ideology” vs. “Christian values” are central targets of right-wing populist appropriation and reinterpretation; rather, the Norwegian Progress Party – the most influential right-wing populist force in the country – focuses on a different human right in its attempts at appropriation: gender equality. This chapter describes these peculiarities and offers explanations of how these trends have come about.

The role of religious freedom in Norwegian politics

In Norway, all parties except the Progress Party have included a section on freedom of religion or belief in their party programmes. Some political groups like to more strongly emphasise the Christian aspects; however, in general there is a broad understanding of the advantages of freedom of religion or belief. The broad support means that religious freedom is not controversially politicised.

Moreover, this situation has a historical and material basis. After the ties between the state and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Norway were dissolved a few years ago, the agreement was that the Church of Norway would continue with some legal and constitutional ties to the state for practical and

historical reasons.¹ During the 16th century Reformation, the (Danish) Crown took the Catholic Church's property, finances and priests in Norway, which was a Danish colony at the time. Not honouring the lasting responsibility that came with this takeover when the (now) Norwegian state no longer wanted any church ties would be equal to historical robbery. The solution is that religion is still financed by the national budget, but now various organised religious communities (including the secular humanists!) above a minimum size receive a sum approximately equivalent to the *pro capita* sum that the Church of Norway receives. This solution means that everyone feels they are well served with the status quo, and freedom of religion is a no-brainer.

One can speculate why the Norwegian Progress Party has taken a different route than many of its international sister parties in questions relating to gender and freedom of religion. A symptom of the different route is that given the current political polarisation in the USA, the current leader Sylvi Listhaug broke the tradition of previous Progress Party leaders attending the annual meeting of the U.S. Republican Party this year (2023).

Some traits in the roots of this party may explain its difference from populist parties elsewhere in Europe. In the 1970s, it started as a populist party opposed to the famously high Scandinavian taxes, Value Added Tax (VAT) and state monopolies on the sale of alcohol. While Christians across the political spectrum agreed that restrictive alcohol policies were positive, the Progress Party took a radically different stance. In this and other respects, they made little effort to appeal to conservative Christians.

Only recently – after populist parties in many countries have become a power to reckon with – has the current leader Sylvi Listhaug started to don a crucifix around her neck, and the party has aligned itself more with Christian-populist parties elsewhere in Europe. Nonetheless, the crucifix does not make up for an embarrassing ignorance about Christianity in the party in general, although it has perhaps somewhat improved with the recent attraction of Christian voters. Traditionally, Norwegian clergy and crucifix-wearing Christians voted for the Christian-Democratic party, merging the Christian love of one's neighbour and the baptismal formula "you are all one" with the Social Democratic "you are all equal." This broad coalition has secured Norway's strong engagement in international humanitarian and peace-keeping efforts.

1 Constitution of the Kingdom of Norway (1814/2023), § 2 and 4, <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/1814-05-17>, accessed on: 4 Jun. 2023.

“Gender ideology” vs. “traditional Christianity”: Not a winning issue for populists in Norway

In general, it is striking that unlike in many other European and Western countries, the narrative of “Christian values” and their defence – which is particularly popular among right-wing populists² – hardly plays a role in the political discussion in Norway, not even in the thematic field of gender and family, which is one of the favourite topics of populists for culture wars elsewhere. This section summarises reasons for this trend.

Realized gender equality immunizes against anti-feminist populism

Traditional, Christian thought is often nodded to in the international, right-wing populist repertoire on gender and family. Various expressions are gathered on the internet (blogs, web pages, etc.), where international, comprehensive discourse and content-sharing is taking place among the like-minded.³ Thus, the internet also facilitates the assertion of Christian points of reference for political purposes, especially regarding gender, equality and family. Important platforms for the spread of populist gender ideology belong in the domains of the two former superpowers, the USA and the former Soviet Union.⁴

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- 2 I will not deal with theology as such, but observe that a religion whose first writer (St. Paul) transmitted the earliest baptismal confession (“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28) is taken hostage under a modern populist-reactionary politics of gender, at the expense of more central, theological questions than the issue of whether a woman should take on paid work in addition to caring for any children and husbands. I use the word “reactionary” because I see populisms more as radical reactions to recent events than as conservative continuities of past religious tradition.
 - 3 Mazzoleni, Gianpietro: “Populism is Better Understood in its Relation with the Media,” in: Mojca Pajnik/Birgit Sauer (eds.), *Populism and the Web: Communicative Practices of Parties and Movements in Europe*. London: Routledge 2018, unpaginated preface; Zuckerberg, Donna: *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2018.
 - 4 In Økland, Jorunn: “Populisme i likestillingslandet,” in: Kristin Graff Kallevåg/Sven Thore Kloster/Sturla J. Stålsett (eds.), *Populisme og kristendom*, Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk 2021, pp. 68–85, on which this chapter is based, I develop the concept of “internet populism” in more detail and scope.

However, while such gender ideology may enjoy a sort of eternal life on the internet, being accessible to all parties, movements or individuals across the globe who seek it out, it conceals deep differences and tensions on the ground. For example, much of this repertoire is off the populist agenda in Norway, despite – or perhaps because of – the country’s strong, conservative religious heritage. Today, institutions, laws, and most religious communities operate based on more inclusive notions of gender equality and freedom that function very well according to all parameters: in fact, in 2012, the then Prime Minister of Norway, the economist Jens Stoltenberg (who is now NATO Secretary General), said that “the Minister of Finance should thank Norwegian women every day!” His point was that Norwegian wealth and welfare systems are – contrary to what many assume – *not* primarily built on revenues from North Sea oil, but rather the near full participation of women in the paid workforce: “If the participation of Norwegian women in the work force had been reduced to the OECD average, the value loss would exceed the value of the Norwegian oil fund combined with the projected future value of the oil still under the (North) seabed.”⁵

This quote illustrates why populist versions of Christian family values are not particularly compatible with material “facts on the ground” in Norway, and are therefore not found to be rational or appealing even among adherents of the parliamentary party most often identified with right-wing populism, the “Progress Party.”⁶ Compared to international populist trends, even the Progress Party may come across as feminist and secular.

The deterring effect of extremism: How Breivik’s anti-feminist 2083 manifesto turned “Christian values” into a narrative that not even right-wing populists want to be associated with

I make a clear distinction here between populism’s *substantive-content* and *strategic-political* sides. Populism – and extremism – may borrow from traditionally Christian theologies of gender and family content-wise (*substantive*), but they strongly differ in how they mobilise the value systems for their respective *strategies* (political demagoguery or violence). If “the people” share their view on the substance (for example “Christian family values”), populists

5 NTB – The Norwegian News Agency: “Kvinnejobber mer verdt enn oljen” (8 Mar. 2012), <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/3JOEv/kvinnejobber-mer-verdt-mer-enn-oljen>, accessed on: 1 Jun. 2023.

6 Fremskrittspartiet (Progress Party), <https://www.frp.no>, accessed on: 25 Sep. 2023.

can rightly claim to represent the people and their true will.⁷ Populism and extremism can further share views on the content substance of freedom of religion and how far it should reach, and they tend to share an enemy image of equality, feminism and feminists. What separates them is the strategy for implementing policy content. Where populism engages in political struggle, extremism takes up arms.

The point of this delineation of the distinctions between populist and extremist takeovers of an established body of thought regarding values, gender and family is as follows: when examining the *content* sides of populist ideology, it can also be relevant to draw in written sources that are usually understood as right-wing extreme, and consider how they represent traditional Christian views. “Traditional values” in Norway are still associated with historical Christianity, fixed roles for men and women, and the white, patriarchal, heterosexual nuclear family, even if a deeper understanding of what it entails is lost.

I will select an example that is uncomfortably close at hand – the “manifesto” behind the terrorist attacks on the Oslo Government Headquarters and Utøya island’s Labour youth camp on 22 July 2011, killing 77 people – to define what is Christian and what is not according to the extremist by analysing his own uses of the label “Christian” about thinking, identity, tradition, etc.⁸

Hours before the attack, the pseudonym Andrew Berwick (Anders B. Breivik) sent his over 1,500-page manifesto “2083 – A European Declaration of Independence” to an e-mail list.⁹ The version referred to here is the one published only two days later, on The Washington Post’s website.¹⁰ “2083” is mostly an edited and annotated collage of fragments from the internet. The introduction asserts that Muslim immigrants and feminists together with multiculturalists are working to destroy Christian Europe. Accordingly, European men must go to war to take back authority, to rescue Europe. In illustrations and the subtitle “De Laude Novae Militiae Pauperes commili-

7 Graff-Kallevåg, Kristin/Kloster, Sven Thore/Stålsett, Sturla J.: “Kapittel 1: Populisme og kristendom – kollisjon eller koalisjon?,” in: Kristin Graff-Kallevåg, Sven Thore Kloster, Sturla J. Stålsett (eds.), *Populisme og kristendom*, Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk 2021, pp. 13–28, p. 20.

8 Graff-Kallevåg: *Populisme*.

9 The presentation is based on my previous publications in the area, such as Økland, Jorunn: “Feminismen, tradisjonen, og forventning,” in Anders Ravik Jupskås (ed.), *Akademiske perspektiver på 22. Juli*, Oslo: Akademia 2013, pp. 115–128.

10 This near-original manifesto was not paginated, so page numbers are approximate.

tones *Christi Templique Solomonici*,” Breivik stages himself within a military-Christian-religious framework, as a pioneer, commander and Templar.

Initially, the terrorist’s anti-feminism was relatively frequently noted in the media, since his main target on Utøya island had been former Prime Minister (and among many other things also former Director-General of the World Health Organization) Gro Harlem Brundtland. Multiculturalism and islamophobia came to dominate the further discussion.

The manifesto’s invocation of Christian authority and tradition never caught noticeable public attention, despite the fact that the single word “Christian” is found one or more times on over one-third of the 1,518 pages. By comparison, “multicult-” is found as part of a compound on “only” 453 pages. In my opinion, this lack of address of the very frequent Christian references is due to the religious illiteracy among Norway’s “chattering” and writing classes, which again means that few commentators and researchers ever noticed the way in which Breivik operationalised European Christian heritage for terrorist purposes. However, the Norwegian right-wing-populist blogger Fjordman – for example from whom Breivik also copy-pasted 39 full essays into “2083” (“Fjordman” is mentioned on 76 pages) – felt abused. On his blog (now removed), Fjordman had repeatedly warned against Muslim immigration to Europe and the loss of European, “Christian” values.¹¹ The journalist and writer Anja Sletteland – who had long been worried about right-wing populists like Fjordman – concluded shortly after the attack that “it is time we realise that the anti-Islamic, anti-social democratic and anti-feminist ‘underdog’ has become a power factor in Norway.”¹²

Sletteland was soon followed by other commentators who noted to their surprise that most of the manifesto’s ideological content is not extremist in the meaning of inciting violence. Nonetheless, it spread conspiracy theories and assessments that were increasingly heard from populists around Europe, Russia and the USA. Therefore, it took days before investigators and journalists connected the manifesto with the terrorist act.

However, in its latter “Further Studies” part, the manifesto includes an interview with the “Justiciar Knight Commander of the PCCTS, Knights Templar,” commonly believed to be a fictive interview that Breivik conducts with

11 Strømme argues that Fjordman was a full-blown fascist who inspired Breivik’s extremism, see Strømme, Øyvind: *Det mørke nettet: Om høyreekstremisme, kontrajihadisme og terror i Europa*, Oslo: Cappelen Damm 2011.

12 Sletteland, Anja: “Kommentar,” in: *Dagens Næringsliv* (2 Aug. 2011), p. 3.

himself.¹³ In general, it is on the final 150 pages of the manifesto that he is most visibly present as an author, not only a copy-pasting editor. He proposes an extremist-militant *strategy* to reach a *final solution* (including death lists on the final pages):¹⁴

“Obviously, the PCCTS, Knights Templar does not have mass appeal as we are a relatively cynical/cruel/goal oriented armed resistance group. However, our primary foundational principles (...) still have mass appeal and are supported by as many as 50–60% of all Europeans. ... Of course, this does not mean that we will use less brutal methods in our operations. It only means that our foundational ideological principles will have mass appeal to a majority of Europeans. In comparison, the foundational principles of National Socialism or white supremacy groups in general does not have mass appeal and is supported by less than 10%, in many countries less than 5%.”¹⁵

The manifesto’s extremist “launch” on 22 July 2011 threw all of the populist, copy-pasted content and the more or less involuntary contributors into an extremist spotlight. Thus, the distinction that I make in this essay between different ways of operationalising overlapping ideological content (populist or extremist) was confirmed – including by the manifesto author himself – in the fictive interview towards the end.

It should be mentioned in passing that the summer of 2019, Norway was close to experiencing another terrorist act by a single, young white male: having been radicalised while attending a one-year Christian college programme (“*Folkehøyskole*”), Philip Manshaus killed his own seventeen-year old adopted sister Johanne Zhangjia Ihle-Hansen (born in China) in a leafy suburb outside Oslo, before he approached the local mosque with the intention to kill Muslim (immigrant) men gathered for prayer. Two retired men who had arrived early managed to prevent further killings by seizing the heavily armed young man and holding him until the police arrived. No one has found reason to blame the

13 Berwick, Andrew: 2083: A European Declaration of Independence, pp. 1349 ff., <http://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2011/07/24/National-Politics/Graphics/2083+++A+European+Declaration+of+Independence.pdf>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2011.

14 He shares personal reflections and experiences during the preparation phases, bomb and explosive production, preparation of the terrorist attack including schedule/log of the preparations July 1–22 (pp. 1437–1472).

15 Berwick: 2083, p. 1381.

Christian college, but perhaps there needs to be an increased awareness of how to phrase the legitimate desire that Christianity will survive in Europe. Unlike Breivik, Manshaus did not leave clues in writing.¹⁶

Gender equality as a populist value?

Much of what the “2083” manifesto presents as the “traditional” gender order is barely 100 years old, not preceding the industrial revolution. It is therefore not “traduced” over centuries. The leap from *the* manifesto’s “traditional” gender order to the Progress Party could not have been greater. As previously mentioned, it arose as a populist reaction, male-heavy and secular. The party opposes gender quotas, with meritocratic arguments. Nonetheless, since 2006 the party leaders have been women. One female leader more or less appointed her successors: another woman, as well as a man who gave up a brilliant career as a politician to follow his wife for her dream job in the USA and was “ordered” to return for a comeback. In the case of another high-profile couple in the party’s inner circle, it was the wife who became a government minister. While I could continue, the examples illustrate a distinctive feature of populist currents in today’s Norway, namely that “real populists” do not practice gender-conservative ideology. The Progress Party in particular has done much to incorporate gender equality as part of its populism. This leads to the rhetoric being different from the kind of populist rhetoric that we find elsewhere in Europe and on the global internet, where it is about returning to patriarchal family values. Indeed, the visible leadership figures in the Church of Norway also do not use such rhetoric, this is why the quasi-religious, patriarchal gender ideology in the online “2083” manifesto crashes so completely in Norwegian “facts on the ground.”

Has “equality” as a value then assumed a new function as an important marker of difference in the populist rhetorical distinction between “ethnic Norwegians” and “immigrants”? Absolutely. Whether intended or not, the effect of the Progress Party taking ownership of “state feminism”¹⁷ is that they gain more ammunition for another of their core causes: immigration. When

16 But see Hammer, Anders: *Terroristen fra Bærum – Radikaliseringen av Philip Manshaus*, Oslo: Stenersen 2022.

17 Hernes, Helga M.: *Welfare State and Woman Power: Essays in State Feminism*, Oslo/Oxford: Norwegian University Press 1987.

refugees come to Norway, they are already trained in gender equality at the asylum reception centres, and the Progress Party is particularly keen to protect Norwegians against immigrant influence from foreign patriarchal cultures.

The historical backdrop may explain some of the curiosities described: after Norway became independent in 1905, males were in sole control of the Parliament (*Storting*) for only eight years before the country became the world's first *independent* nation to introduce universal female suffrage in 1913. The front fighters for the women's vote had received their leadership training in priestly families, as wives and daughters running the vicarage. Naturally, this has affected Norwegian collective self-understanding. When the *Storting* discussed the opening of *all* public offices for women in 1911/12, only the parliament president's double vote ensured that the proposal did not go through, with gender-exclusive exceptions being made for clerical and military offices.¹⁸ The "2083" manifesto's dream of returning to a past with Christian patriarchs and submissive, pious wives thus crashes not only in today's Norwegian political and ecclesiastical reality but also in Norwegian history.

This backdrop further undermines explanations of anti-equality populism in Norway with reference to men's experience of a loss of superiority as a result of new equality policies.

Breivik and Manshaus related to an abstract *populus* on the internet, while Norway's *populus* moved to another place over a century ago.¹⁹ This in turn illustrates how "populism" remains difficult to pin down ideologically in relation to "democracy," because the perception of the people on behalf of whom one claims to speak is constantly changing and varies between countries.

Conclusion

In the Norwegian context, there is reason to question how *Christian* "traditional" family values are, how *traditional* they are if they arose in the late-19th century, and how *Norwegian* they are, given that women have been full citizens in Norway almost from the day of its independence. When Norwegian internet populists yearn for a past that never existed, it is therefore important to meet

18 Hinnaland Stendal, Synnøve: "... under forvandlingens lov": En analyse av Stortingsdebatten om kvinnelige prester i 1930-årene, Lund: Arcus 2003.

19 Brubaker, Rogers: "Why Populism?," in: *Theory and Society* 46 (2017), pp. 357–385, p. 373.

their universalist claims with concrete stories from Norwegian political and religious history. I assume that this also applies to other countries.

The chapter has presented the cognitive dissonance that arises in the gap between a manifesto mainly composed by copying and pasting from the global populist internet and the conditions on the ground in Norway, in church, history and the political practice of politics. The brief explanation concerning why populism seems to be less attractive as a political ideology in Norway is that: first, people have seen and experienced for themselves the beneficial results of an equality-based society where people are not pitted against each other; second, the recent right-wing extremist terror attack in Oslo in 2011 (and 2019) put the ugly face of right-wing ideology on display; and third, even populist rhetoric has to incorporate gender equality to remain plausible and appealing. It is too early to say how this will align Norwegian-style populism with populism elsewhere in Europe.

The first part of this chapter prepared for what came in the second part: in a country where right-wing populism is not a significant political force on the ground, populist ideas about a Christian Europe threatened by immigration, Islam and falling birth rates among white people are still available via the internet. I acknowledge the presence of such arguments in populist political discourse, and distinguish them from extremist uses of the same ideas. Indeed, the distinction is found in the “2083” manifesto itself. Nonetheless, in Norway it was this general populist discourse that took control over two young, white, vulnerable males who proceeded to engage in violent action. Norway has learnt the hard way that populist rhetoric should not be excused or underestimated, as with certain recipients it can lead to extremist action.

Populist Appropriation and Reinterpretation of Religious Freedom

The Special Responsibility and Concern of the Churches and Religious Communities

Katja Dorothea Buck, Bernd Hirschberger and Katja Voges

Right-wing ideologies are in fundamental contradiction to the basic contents of many religions. In Christian faith, commandment of love of one's neighbour excludes group-focused enmity per se. Churches and religious communities all over the world have a special moral responsibility in the fight against right-wing populism and extremism. They need to take a stand against misanthropic ideologies and discrimination and can play a key role at various levels when populist actors try to reinterpret the universal right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and use it to serve their own interests.

Furthermore, the commitment against right-wing populism and extremism is a question of interreligious solidarity, especially for Christian churches in most European countries, which can operate in democratic and free spaces. The major churches in Germany also expressly acknowledge this repeatedly.¹ However, as the largest religious community in Europe, Christian churches are also called upon to stand up in solidarity with Christians who live as a minority in other countries against the damage to religious freedom caused by a populist reinterpretation. They need to object to disproportionate restrictions on FoRB, because such restrictions can be abused by autocratic states as a pretext

1 Only recently, this acknowledgement was renewed in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the World Council of Churches in their joint statement: *Serving a Wounded World in Interreligious Solidarity: A Christian Call to Reflection and Action During COVID-19 and Beyond*, WCC Publications/PCID 2020, <https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/ServingWoundedWorld.pdf>, accessed on: 21 Jul. 2023.

to relativise their own even worse violations of this right to freedom, following a pattern of “whataboutism.”

In addition to moral responsibility, churches and religious communities also have specific resources and potential for the fight against right-wing populism and its temptations: especially in a changing world shaken by various (existential) crises, many people are looking for meaning, community and identity. Churches and religious communities must not leave this field to right-wing populist and extremist forces. Offering meaning, community and identity has always been one of the basic functions of religious communities. If this need remains unsatisfied, right-wing populist and far-right extremist forces can easily take advantage of this situation, simulating an (exclusive) sense of belonging, and thus offer a generally exclusionary identity. This works all the better the more strongly people feel overwhelmed by an increasingly complex world. Churches and religious communities are therefore challenged more than ever to provide real alternatives to the fatal and harmful illusory solutions offered by populism and extremism.

However, religious communities themselves are by no means immune to populist sentiments. For example, the fear of Islam – which is perceived as foreign and unknown – makes quite a few parishioners of Christian churches in Germany and large parts of Europe susceptible to prejudice, resentment and populist narratives such as concern for the Christian Occident and supposed Christian values. Some right-wing conservative, populist and extremist groups that are church-based or church-affiliated (or claim to be so) actively participate in the appropriation and reinterpretation of religious freedom and spread corresponding narratives. Thus, headlines such as “Muezzin call to prayer in Cologne – politics courting ‘radical headscarf Islam’ – knife in the back of integration” or “Catholic bishops’ denial of reality in the debate with Islam” are not uncommon on the traditionalist internet portal *kath.net*, which is financed by private donations.²

In some cases, open alliances between church actors and populist politicians are already evident. For example, the former right-wing populist Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro owes his election victory in 2018 not least to strong support from the circles of Evangelicals and Pentecostals.³ The former Pres-

2 <https://kath.net/suche.php?suche=islam>, accessed on: 1 Jul. 2022.

3 See chapter “Religious Freedom for Christian Majorities: The Brazilian Case”.

ident of the United States Donald Trump also benefited massively from the support of the “Christian right.”⁴

The susceptibility of such Christian actors to populist arguments is in turn what extremist actors from the far right try to exploit. For example, they often use Christian symbols in a decontextualised way and incorporate them into their misanthropic ideological framework.⁵ In the process, obvious contradictions between the far-right ideological way of thinking and central Christian principles of faith (such as the contradiction between group-focused enmity and the commandment of love of one’s neighbour) are deliberately hidden or covered up. The appropriation and reinterpretation often represent a profanation of what is Christian, reducing it to something purely cultural-folkloric.

In some cases, attempts by the far right to get closer to churches with the aim of using church representatives for their own interests and thereby gaining legitimacy can also be observed. For example, the far-right Identity and Democracy (ID) group in the European Parliament nominated the Chaldean Archbishop of Mosul, Najib Mikhael Moussa, for the Sakharov Prize 2020, not without inciting anger about the immigration of Muslims at the same time.⁶ A member of the parliamentary group contacted church dignitaries in Germany to promote this nomination, arguing that together they could convince chairpersons of other parliamentary groups, which was highly unlikely given

4 See chapter “Populism, Religious Identity, and the Instrumentalization of ‘Religious Freedom’ in the United States during the Era of Donald Trump”.

5 See e.g. NBC News: “Trump Stands In Front of Church Holding Bible After Threatening Military Action Against Protesters” (2 Jun. 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0oRQF68psdY>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023; AfD spokesman Hans-Peter Hörner shows the crucifix while Imam Ahmed Gezer calls for prayer from the roof of the mosque: Kromer, Hardy: “AfD sagt Kundgebung ab – Albbündnis veröffentlicht Appell für Religionsfreiheit” (7 May 2020), https://www.swp.de/lokales/hechingen/ramadan-und-8.-mai-in-hechingen-afd-sagt-kundgebung-ab_-albbuendnis-veroeffentlicht-appell-fuer-religionsfreiheit-46034346.html, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023. In this context, the Freedom Party of Austria’s (FPÖ) strategic rapprochement with the Church is also interesting: Mühlberger, Andrea: “Rechtspopulismus im Zeichen des Kreuzes” (29 May 2009), <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/rechtspopulismus-im-zeichen-des-kreuzes-100.html>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

6 Anderson, Christine (@AndersonAfdMdEP): Der Erzbischof von #Mossul, Najib Michael Moussa, kämpft im #Irak gegen die Verfolgung von #Christen durch den #Islam und warnt vor den Folgen unregelter muslimischer #Migration. Die ID-Fraktion nominiert diesen mutigen Mann für den #Sakharov Preis! #AfD (7 Oct. 2020), <https://twitter.com/AndersonAfdMdEP/status/1313805433161777154>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

that four parliamentary groups had already declared themselves in favour of awarding the prize to the Belarusian opposition.⁷ On several occasions, Members of Parliament from right-wing parties have also travelled to countries such as Syria or Armenia where the Christian population is under pressure for domestic or foreign policy reasons. At meetings with Christian representatives, they presented themselves as the only sincere supporters of the interests of oppressed Christians abroad.

If the churches refuse to cooperate or even criticise the right, they are sometimes sharply attacked by the far right. For example, in Germany, the Protestant and Catholic churches have already been the target of accusations from the far-right party *Alternative for Germany* (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) because their positions on the most important social issues are diametrically opposed. In June 2019, for example, the Thuringian state parliamentary group of the AfD – with the support of other prominent representatives of the party – published a paper entitled “Unholy Alliance – The Pact of the Protestant Church with the *Zeitgeist* and the Powerful,” which criticises the Evangelical Church in Germany (*Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*, EKD) for its position on refugee aid and its commitment to climate protection, among other things, and complains about an exclusion of the AfD on the part of the churches.⁸ Overall, the defamation of church representatives with a different opinion is a common pattern in the rhetoric of the far right. They are portrayed as representatives of a “politicised” institutional church⁹ running after the *zeitgeist*, thus distancing themselves from the “true” faith and representing neither the faith nor the people.

7 European Parliament News: Sakharov Prize 2020: the nominees (17 Sep. 2020), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20200917STO87301/sakharov-prize-2020-the-nominees>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

8 See Lohmann, Heinz-Joachim: “Kommentar zum Kirchenpapier der Alternative für Deutschland: Unheilige Allianz. Der Pakt der Evangelischen Kirche mit dem *Zeitgeist* und den Mächtigen,” <https://www.eaberlin.de/aktuelles/2019/pressemitteilung-kirchenpapier-afd/kommentar-zum-kirchenpapier-der-afd.pdf>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

9 In German often the expression *Amtskirche* is used in a pejorative way by the far right for its criticism of the official churches.

Church engagement against the right-wing populist appropriation of religious freedom

Contradict

Due to their moral responsibility as well as their position in society, it is important that Christian churches do not allow themselves to be taken over. This risk of appropriation exists specifically in dealing with mandate holders from the far right. In democratic processes, representatives can also be elected who seek to distort or abolish human rights and/or democracy. The question is how churches should deal with them. For example, in 2019 there was an invitation from the far-right party AfD to the German Bishops' Conference (*Deutsche Bischofskonferenz*, DBK),¹⁰ which represented a feint or a dilemma: if the invitation was accepted, the AfD was given legitimacy; on the other hand, if it was rejected, the AfD could present itself as a victim of exclusion. Therefore, how should it be dealt with? In principle, respect for democratic decision-making and democratically legitimised office applies. However, this respect must not be confused with a right to social and political acceptance for right-wing extremist parties and politicians.¹¹ Nor is there any taboo on contradicting anti-human statements or an undermining of human rights. On the contrary, precisely due to the special public reach that results from a church office, churches and their representatives must contradict particularly clearly and loudly. It must also be understood that contents that are contemptuous of human rights must not be given a stage at church events.¹²

10 Alternative für Deutschland: Joachim Kuhs: AfD lädt Bischofskonferenz zum Dialog ein. <https://www.afd.de/kuhs-afd-laedt-bischofskonferenz-zum-dialog-ein/>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

11 There is no such right as the EKD aptly states: Dernbach, Andrea: "Evangelische Kirche zur AfD: 'Kein Recht auf gesellschaftliche und politische Akzeptanz'" (2 Aug. 2019), <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/kein-recht-auf-gesellschaftliche-und-politische-akzeptanz-4654960.html>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

12 While the DBK and EKD are very clearly opposed to right-wing ideas and populist narratives, some evangelical and far-right Catholic actors in Germany have difficulty in clearly distancing themselves, see also the observations of Liane Bednarz at an event of the Heinrich Böll foundation: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung: Die Angstprediger – Wie rechte Christen Gesellschaft und Kirchen unterwandern (21 Jun. 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVmfXRha5AU&t=3568s>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

In 2018, a controversial discussion arose after the participation of an AfD politician on a podium at the German *Katholikentag* in Münster led to protests. As a result, both the *Katholikentag* and the German Protestant *Kirchentag* (the regular large-scale meetings of the laity in the two major German churches) decided not to invite any more representatives of the AfD in the future. They argue that group-focused enmity is to be clearly and unequivocally opposed. Far-right ideas that fundamentally contradict the Christian image of human being should not be given a platform.

There are particular tensions in countries where far-right parties have major influence through a large parliamentary group and/or government participation. To what extent are churches prepared to accept disadvantages for themselves when they contradict the positions of the far right? In such contexts, contradiction can be associated with painful consequences, for example the cancellation of financial support, of rights and resources (cultural support, support for church youth, education and social work, voluntary work and associations, support for church development cooperation, exemption from taxes, etc.). However, in order to avoid denying oneself and one's own convictions, the consistent answer here is also to accept painful consequences in case of doubt.

Opposition from churches is urgently needed, especially regarding the human right to religious freedom, which is being reinterpreted and instrumentalised by populist and far-right extremist actors. The appropriation of Christian identity must not go unchallenged for the sake of the Christian witness. Equally, solidarity with Christians in need must not be falsely played off as a counterargument to universally valid of FoRB.

Educate and leave no space

To ensure that the opposition to populism and extremism does not remain without content, it should go hand in hand with educational and public relations work, strengthening a Christian position that takes a human rights approach in its commitment to FoRB. In doing so, it is important to show that the Christian image of human being is only compatible with a decisive commitment to religious freedom as a universal right to freedom and does not allow any reinterpretations. The visibility of church actors, human rights education with a focus on FoRB and networking with other human rights actors are important to counter misunderstandings and convey an understanding of why religious freedom is an essential component of indivisible human rights.

Even though representatives from churches and politics report growing mistrust and dwindling acceptance of churches, Christian churches and their organisations in Germany still have reliable contact and liaison points in politics. The human rights commitment of church organisations and especially their expertise and international networks continue to be appreciated. Here, it is necessary to bring the churches' expertise regarding the human right to religious freedom into politics and show that they are important actors in human rights work. It should also be discussed collectively how the suffering religious (also Christian) minorities in regions of the world that currently receive no special public attention can be helped without falling into clientelistic or paternalistic patterns. Furthermore, politics can be encouraged to promote actions and initiatives that focus on the value of FoRB for the whole of society.

Opposition to populism and educational work by the churches for the universal right to religious freedom must not be limited to discussions with political representatives. As far as possible, no room should be left for the instrumentalisation of religious freedom. Therefore, it is important that churches involve themselves in the broader public with their own information, initiatives and continuous public relations work. Christian churches in Germany have already positioned themselves as strong and serious actors in the field of religious freedom with various initiatives.¹³ Church relief organisations are also visible with their commitment to human rights and religious freedom; for example through the promotion of projects in the field of interreligious dialogue and peace work, even if sustainable aid is more difficult “to sell” than supposedly simple answers and convenient illusory solutions.

Leaving no room also means strengthening interreligious initiatives, making successful initiatives and cooperations visible and forging broad alliances, including with non-church actors who stand up for the indivisibility of human rights, such as the cooperation between the Pontifical Mission Society *missio*

13 See e.g. the country reports on religious freedom by the Pontifical Mission Society *missio* Aachen, the joint reports of the German Bishops' Conference and the Protestant Church in Germany on religious freedom worldwide (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), the initiative “Solidarity with persecuted and oppressed Christians in our time” of the German Bishops' Conference; the days of remembrance for persecuted Christians, which take place in the Catholic Church on St. Stephen's Day and the initiatives of the EKD on Reminiscere Sunday.

Aachen and Reporters without Borders, who campaigned together for the release of a Vietnamese blogger.¹⁴ This literally suggests combining the advocacy for religious freedom with the advocacy for other human rights, such as freedom of the press or women's rights, and creating synergies in corresponding cooperations and thus reaching other circles that have not yet been confronted with the relevance of religious freedom.¹⁵

Successful educational work is made more difficult by a media logic that rewards polarisation, sensationalism and simplification – including in the form of quantification in rankings – with attention. Accordingly, it is important for churches to consciously seek dialogue with media representatives on the topic of religious freedom and tirelessly express their human rights-guided perspective. It is necessary to reflect together on how to address sensitive concerns such as legitimate public safety interests without appealing to populist sentiments or accepting collateral damage to religious freedom.

Open learning spaces for religious freedom through interreligious dialogue and ecumenical learning

Nowadays, many members of non-Christian religions live in Europe, although even after years they are still perceived as foreign by large parts of the population. Real encounters do not take place often. A typical reflex to this insecurity is to retreat into one's own world. The demarcation from the foreign – whether it is an individual or a different opinion – and the search for community with like-minded people are obvious. Reinforced by media debates about Islamist violence and a perceived overburdening by excessive migration, corresponding experiences of foreignness or the fear of it are a breeding ground for populism and exclusion.

In view of the challenges that globalisation poses to people, churches and other religious communities can consciously contribute to enabling people to deal constructively with experiences of foreignness, fears and sometimes also

14 *missio* Aachen: *missio und Reporter ohne Grenzen gemeinsam für verfolgte Christen in Vietnam* | *missio* (1 Feb. 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-bEDhoMjBU>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

15 See e.g. the publication of the Norwegian mission and human rights organization Stefanus Alliance International: *Freedom of religion or belief for everyone: Women in focus*, 2021, <https://www.stefanus.no/english/women-and-forb/>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

conflicts to create a sustainable basis for community in this way.¹⁶ Interreligious dialogue and ecumenism are spaces in which churches can lay the foundations for constructive coexistence, a learning experience that in turn also makes people more resistant to the appropriation of right-wing populist actors. In such learning spaces, an awareness of the necessity of a human rights-based approach to religious freedom can also grow.

Interreligious dialogue

Interreligious dialogue plays a vital role in countering the appropriation of religious freedom by right-wing populist actors. First of all, dialogue itself is to be understood as an expression of the fundamental Christian conviction that underlies the churches' commitment to religious freedom as a universal human right: from a Christian perspective, dialogue is not only important to defend human dignity together but carries its own value as a place of a joint search and encounter with God.

Interreligious dialogue is also strategically important because it gives the commitment to religious freedom greater credibility and a broader impact. Interfaith coalitions – as well as statements on a common understanding of FoRB – can show politicians and society that the commitment to religious freedom is not about clientelism. Through the lens of interreligious dialogue, it becomes evident that the appropriation of religious freedom leads to violations of this very freedom. Church partners worldwide report that only through interreligious dialogue can living together and the situation of religious freedom be improved in the long term.

The commitment to religious freedom in interreligious dialogue also highlights the importance of a differentiated approach in order to first create a communicative basis for a dialogue on religious freedom. For example, a distinction should be made according to the severity of violations of religious freedom, rather than generally speaking of “persecution of Christians” even in the case of isolated minor discrimination. Only through a differentiated perception and communication can it be clearly stated where situations are not to be

16 See e.g. the reflection on a constructive approach to fear within the framework of the Concerted Action 2023/2024 by *Justitia et Pax Europe: Facing our Fears and Reconnecting the World* (22 Feb. 2023), <http://www.juspax-eu.org/en/home/meldungen/Concerted-Action-2023-2024.php>, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2023.

tolerated and less existential problems can be discussed together and improved without alienating the other party through undifferentiated statements.¹⁷

Finally, interreligious dialogue helps to work on attitudes. Interreligious dialogue creates curiosity about others, helps with an understanding of what is foreign as an enrichment and not as a threat and makes positive experiences possible. In this way, interreligious dialogue at all levels is part of the churches' commitment against the appropriation of religious freedom. Positive dialogue experiences – including from churches worldwide – need to be communicated, and corresponding networks have to be strengthened. Churches have the structures to do this at grassroot level. Where people experience interreligious dialogue as beneficial, the appropriation of religious freedom hardly has a chance of success.

Ecumenical learning

Ecumenism represents diversity per se and offers spaces in which the acceptance of differences can be learned. This is helpful in order to be alert to the appropriation of religious freedom by far-right extremist or right-wing populist actors and raise the voices together against such tendencies.

Sometimes denominational diversity within Christianity is understood as a troublesome challenge, especially when there is a background desire for “the Christians” or “the churches” to speak with one voice. There is also no unity of opinion on religious freedom in some ecumenical contexts, especially when one church has to assert itself as a minority in its context, while other churches' freedom is guaranteed and protected by the state.

However, if diversity is not defined a priori as a deplorable state but as a natural result of the development of a religion over the millennia, in which people have come to different views of faith and the Gospel, new possibilities for learning together open up. The common foundation – faith in Jesus Christ – supports, strengthens and encourages people to engage with the other. Differences in theology and understanding of what church means cannot and must not be dismissed. Rather, it is precisely in the exchange about these differences that there is the chance to better understand not only the other but also one's own view.

17 Voges, Katja: Religionsfreiheit im christlich-muslimischen Dialog. Optionen für ein christlich motiviertes und dialogorientiertes Engagement, Zürich: TVZ 2021, p. 340.

With the various exchange and study programmes, the churches already have numerous opportunities to empower people to deal positively with foreignness in a globalised world.¹⁸ Anyone who has had the experience of being a stranger has a different perspective of people from other countries and religions and can guide them and others when it comes to living together and integration and when it comes to not being taken over by right-wing extremist and populist actors in questions of religious freedom.

Ecumenical learning can also take place at the parochial level if local parishes consciously approach local Migrant Churches, offer them spaces and if the joint use of church spaces also provides opportunities for exchange during activities such as coffee at church, congregational lunches, leisure activities, etc.

Overall, interreligious and ecumenical learning changes the view of the other and thus also strengthens awareness of the importance of religious freedom and the notion that religious freedom applies equally to all. Such spaces of dialogue are also only possible in contexts in which a certain degree of religious freedom exists, which in turn sensitises people to recognise far-right appropriations of religious freedom as being hostile to dialogue.

However, interreligious and interdenominational encounters can also “tip over” and intensify experiences of strangeness if the dialogue is not consciously conducted and strategically accompanied. Interreligious dialogue and ecumenical exchange need experience and know-how, and they have to be taught and studied.¹⁹ Churches can strengthen and promote these programmes and make them even more visible in their contexts and beyond, so that interreligious dialogue and ecumenical encounters are not perceived as the specialty of a few but rather valuable and important tools of the churches,

18 E.g. Studium in Israel (Theological study year at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem); Studium im Mittleren Osten (SiMO); Interreligious Studies in Japan Programme; Bread for the World Scholarship Programme; Intercultural Theology in Hermannsburg and Göttingen; Study Programme at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey; Study Programme at the Ecumenical Theological Institute *Al Mowafaqa* in Rabat; Ecumenical Volunteer Programmes of mission agencies, etc.

19 Repp, Martin: “Globale theologische Ausbildung im Zeitalter zunehmender Globalisierung. Die Aufgabe interreligiöser Studienprogramme für multireligiöse Gesellschaften,” in: Martin Repp (ed.), *Theologische Ausbildung im Zeitalter zunehmender Globalisierung. Ökumenische und interreligiöse Studienprogramme in Indien, Israel, Japan und dem Libanon*, Leipzig: EVA 2022, pp. 113–128.

enabling people to locate themselves in an increasingly complex world and not to be blinded and appropriated by populist and extreme right-wing narratives.

Meaning, community and identity

At the beginning of this paper, the specific resources and potentials of churches for the fight against right-wing populism and its temptations were addressed: in a world where many people feel a lack of orientation and meaning, churches can create meaning, community and identity and thus offer a true alternative to illusory solutions of populism and extremism. In order to make full use of these resources, it is essential that the churches' potential is perceived and recognised in the broader society. A prerequisite for this is to overcome the deep credibility crisis in which the churches find themselves in Europe and partly also in other continents – not least the faulty and slow coming processing of sexualised violence and the adherence to problematic structures have alienated large sections of society from the churches and undermined their position as trustworthy institutions that offer support.

This lost trust must be regained so that churches are generally perceived as contact partners in difficult life situations and dealing with existential questions. Debates about church structures must undoubtedly be held. The observation that debates within churches take up so much space that people's questions of meaning and faith are neglected should make us think. If the churches do not take up these existential questions of the people, create real spaces of encounter and seek new and unusual ways, there is a danger that the space will also be taken up by right-wing populist actors.

Beliefs, Brains and Breaking Chains

How Education on “Living Together” can Promote Freedom of Religion or Belief in Lebanon amid rising Populist Narratives

Anna Maria Daou

Introduction

Interest in the protection and promotion of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) has significantly increased during the past decade in a progressively diverse world in general, and in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in particular. Usually considered as a Western concept that does not resonate with the religious and cultural values of the area, the term has not previously been devoted much attention, is relatively under-researched, or uses frameworks from Western literature to develop claims that are – more often than not – contextually spurious.

Furthermore, the rise of exclusionary populism across countries has posed significant challenges to the principles of FoRB and “living together” through propagating speeches laden with hate and calls to violence especially against religious minorities and groups whose beliefs are different from those in power. In addition, many individuals – including the non-religious – face structural discrimination in schools, places of employment, and local communities.

However, advancements are also being recorded around the world by civil society organizations adopting a human rights approach in promoting inclusive citizenship and living together. For instance, several organizations – including Adyan Foundation for Diversity, Solidarity and Human Dignity, based in Beirut – invest considerable effort in formal and non-formal “education on living together” programs to increase awareness on the concepts of FoRB, di-

versity, and citizenship while supporting activists in their mission to challenge discriminatory practices, engage in policy reform, and inspire change.

Furthermore, the additional layer of opening up spaces for dialogue that allow both students and activists to share their experiences, pose their questions and discuss best practices strengthens their knowledge and provides a platform for cross-regional cooperation.

Therefore, my research project aims at exploring how “education on living together” – which includes education on FoRB – is one tool that can be used in mitigating the adverse effects of exclusionary populist narratives while fostering respect for diversity. This could manifest in the form of classes, courses, initiatives as well as peer learning and support provided through coalitions or networks. Based on the above, I argue that:

- Raising awareness of one’s self and the “different” other increases understanding of diversity, pluralism and FoRB while equipping individuals with sufficient knowledge to deconstruct fear that is sometimes utilized by populist leaders and parties to create “in” and “out” groups.
- Encouraging students as well as activists to be proactive rather than reactive in the face of discrimination through supporting their initiatives for protecting FoRB and promoting “living together” increases cross-communitarian solidarity and widens the definition of who the “people” are.
- Using knowledge, influence and recorded changes in attitudes and perceptions of FoRB and diversity can help to advocate for new policies and reforms that promote inclusive citizenship and strengthen social cohesion.

By further exploring this three-layer dynamic, I would be able to develop a set of recommendations for different stakeholders on how to better target programs related to FoRB and “living together.” However, this article does not claim that “education for living together” is a wand that will magically reverse the negative effects of populism, nor does it seek to present it as a “one-solution-fits-all” that works equally in all contexts. It simply seeks to further study how this method can be used as an awareness tool in societies that are prone to misinformation and hate speech.

For the purposes of this essay, I will use FoRB and religious freedom somewhat interchangeably, despite the fact that the former has a broader definition. In some instances, I will also refer to “education on diversity” in addition to “education on living together” to differentiate between the theoretical and practical aspects of learning. Finally, religious minorities will be used to refer

to groups that are smaller in number, or who find themselves excluded in a society where the majority of people are from another religion.

Populism, “othering” and the construction of fear

Literature on populism is abundant. The complexity of the term at hand has led scholars – including political scientists, sociologists, historians and philosophers – to find a definition that encompasses its different layers. Despite “almost” being impossible, they succeeded in pinpointing important elements that can be used to further understand the dynamic of populism and its consequences on individuals, groups and societies. Based on the many definitions developed throughout the years, I will refer to the following components to provide a general framework for the subsequent sections:

- An inherent focus on a homogeneous definition of “the people,” as the only ones able to legitimize the understanding of democracy and democratic decision-making, which is why populism incessantly calls on “the people,” “the under-privileged,” “the righteous” or the “other 99%”;¹
- A “Manichean” or “us vs. them” construction that pits one group against the other and causes conflicts in diverse societies, thus hindering policies that promote religious freedom and inclusive citizenship;²
- An anti-pluralist approach, where populism implies that only a selected group is considered as part of the “people,” creating a dichotomy between “in” and “out” groups as defined by those in power.³

The aforementioned features can easily be manipulated to create an “other” that can hold the blame for the shortcomings of state and non-state institutions. However, the issue lies in our construction of “us” and “them.” Therefore, one might ask: who is considered “privileged” and who is not? Are refugees really the ones less marginalized than citizens in Western communities? Do

1 Katsambekis, Giorgos: “The Populist Surge in Post-Democratic Times: Theoretical and Political Challenges,” in: *The Political Quarterly* 88 (2016), pp. 202–210.

2 Sengul, Kurt: “Swamped: The Populist Construction of Fear, Crisis and Dangerous others in Pauline Hanson’s Senate Speeches,” in: *Communication Research and Practice* 6 (2020), pp. 20–37.

3 Müller, Jan-Werner: *What is Populism?*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2016.

religious minorities have more privileges or rights than the majority groups in different MENA countries? The answers to these questions lie in the salient perceptions of the “people” and “enemy,” whose characteristics are defined and developed by populist individuals or groups, based on their interests and gains.

One can also consider that populism is not merely a term but rather a powerful tool for political mobilization and communication. Capitalizing on the “fear” and “ignorance” factors, exclusionary populists usually look for “scape-goats” to blame for ruining their “ideal” society because they are “different.”⁴ For example, this dynamic is quite evident among right-wing leaders in the West who promote Islamophobia under the pretense that Muslims have different values than their own, and that they are merely the protectors of diversity, equality, freedom and tolerance, while they are actually clearly violating some of the basic tenants of FoRB.⁵ Similarly, Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities in the MENA region are also prone to discriminatory narratives and exclusion by Islamist populists who focus in their narratives on the “purity” of Islam and the refusal of “Western-imposed” values to which they believe that most non-Muslim groups adhere.

Furthermore, both religion and politics have a strong connection to “fear.” It could also be said that populism and “fear” are correlated, meaning that the higher the fear, the stronger the populist narrative, and vice versa.⁶ Populist leaders often refer to the overly simplistic claim that certain religions are inherently violent, and that followers of this religion are automatic perpetrators. Thus, they neglect studying the intricate interplay of political, historical and socio-psychological factors that contribute to human rights abuses in general and FoRB in particular in diverse contexts.⁷ In fact, it is quite common to see that religious groups who are persecuted in one country can be perpetrators in another where they are a majority or hold power. Furthermore, the Social

4 Bergmann, Eiríkur: “Populism and the Politics of Misinformation,” in: *Safundi* 21 (2020), pp. 251–265.

5 Sengul, Kurt: “Swamped: The Populist Construction of Fear, Crisis and Dangerous others in Pauline Hanson’s Senate Speeches,” in: *Communication Research and Practice* 6 (2020), pp. 20–37.

6 Palaver, Wolfgang: “Populism and Religion: On the Politics of Fear,” in: *Dialog* 58 (2019), pp. 22–29.

7 Bielefeldt, Heiner: “Freedom of Religion or Belief – A Human Right under Pressure,” in: *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* (1/2012), pp. 15–35.

Identity Theory⁸ posits that individuals belong to different social categories and have multiple identities that might become salient based on certain cues, whether social, economic, cultural, religious or political. This is particularly true for members of minority groups, including immigrants, who often have two or more cultural identities that can be manipulated through populist narratives, which heightens feelings of fear and perceived threat and might hinder their freedom in expressing their religious beliefs.

Because contemporary populism generally rejects all forms of social and cultural pluralism while promoting the idea of “one homogeneous group,”⁹ and given that most people do not feel invested in the defense of human rights, we can observe that the “ethos of solidarity”¹⁰ is weak in some areas and stronger in others. Furthermore, people’s interest in getting to know the “different other” is not always piqued especially if they live in a homogeneous community, with no access to people who believe, think or act differently that they do. The importance of diversity in the realm of FoRB is due to the fact that it extends beyond differences in belief systems and rites to encompass the intrinsic value of human dignity that should be respected by all.

Education on “living together”: The key to counteract populist narratives and promote religious freedom

Adyan Foundation focuses on the following two layers of “education on living together”:

- a) Building the capacities of children and youth towards respecting the right to difference with an open mind and positivity in thought and behavior;
- b) Strengthening the spirit of initiative and active participation in public life, within a framework of cross-cultural and cross-sectarian partnership in

8 Tajfel, Henri/Turner, John: “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior,” in: Stephen Worchel/William G. Austin (eds.), *Psychology of Intergroup Relation*, Chicago: Hall Publishers 1986, pp. 7–24.

9 Palaver: *Populism and Religion*.

10 Alston, Philip: “The Populist Challenge to Human Rights,” in: *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 9 (2017), pp. 1–15.

view of collaborating towards realizing the “common good” and building an effective inclusive citizenship.¹¹

One can notice that the terms used in this definition are quite general and global. The intention behind this explanation was to allow different individuals and organizations to contextualize terms in such a way that resonates with their local community. In fact, most of the corpus on diversity management has been developed in the West and might not work as efficiently – if at all – in contexts such as the Middle East, due to different cultures, values, history and language being used.¹² Therefore, the contextualization of policies and curricula in diversity management is important, although it should not be an excuse to enhance divisions and abuse differences. This is not always easy given that most stakeholders lack the know-how due to limited resources or insufficient capacity-building on diversity management or education on “living together.”

A good example of this is the work that Adyan Foundation has done in its non-formal educational programme “Training of Trainers on Freedom of Religion or Belief,” which is the translated Arabic version of the course also implemented in English on the FoRB learning platform. This course is presented online twice a year, once for trainers, civil society actors and policy-makers and once for a specialized group of individuals interested in learning about FoRB, such as journalists, faith-based activists and artists. Adyan Foundation not only translated the content but also contextualized it to become fit for MENA participants. It did so by focusing on the narrative of “inclusive citizenship” and how it related to FoRB rather than simply relying on Western definitions and mechanisms, added a module on understanding FoRB from a religious perspective, and alluded to declarations in the area that were developed for promoting and protecting FoRB. In addition, it changed examples to include both violations of FoRB in the region as well as advancements being made in this field.

Similar programs are considered important because they increase learners’ knowledge on human rights in general and FoRB in particular, which can be empowering because it increases their agency and shifts their perceptions of

11 Adyan Foundation: “Defining Education on Living Together,” in: Adyan’s Annual Report 2018–2019.

12 Hennekam, Sophie/Tahssain-Gay, Loubna/Syed, Jawad: “Contextualizing Diversity Management in the Middle East and North Africa: A Relational Perspective,” in: *Human Resource Management Journal* 27 (2017), pp. 459–476.

themselves and others from merely "victims" and "perpetrators" as presented in the populist narrative to "active citizens" working together to build communities and achieve justice.¹³ However, acknowledging that narratives related to FoRB are not the same everywhere is important to avoid unifying experiences and undermining real claims of discrimination by certain "out-groups."¹⁴

Because we distinguish between education of human rights (which is mainly theoretical) and education for human rights (which includes the practical aspect of it), scholars on multicultural education agree that "learning about, through, and for diversity and plurality is at the very heart of citizenship education."¹⁵ In order for such a type of education to work in schools and centers, it is important that the values and ideals presented resonate with the experiences of students and learners. In other words, citizenship education in general focuses on one belonging to a nation-state, a unified "group," but sometimes ignores one's multi-layered identity and commitment to their groups and local communities.¹⁶ Therefore, education on "living together" extends beyond assimilation and seeks to help students and learners to understand that they can be part of both the general "national civic culture" and their "specific cultural communities,"¹⁷ making them less prone to populist narratives that sometimes capitalize on the fear of losing one's identity.

In her article "The Role of Peace-Education as a Coexistence, Reconciliation and Peace-Building Device in Ethiopia," Abdi defined education not only as a place to acquire knowledge but also as a place to develop one's attitudes, values and behavior.¹⁸ This definition brought me back to the term "community of inquiry," where individuals consider themselves "one among the oth-

13 Osler, Audrey H.: "Higher Education, Human Rights and Inclusive Citizenship," in: Tehmina N. Basit/Sally Tomlinson (eds.), *Social Inclusion and Higher Education*, Bristol: Bristol University Press 2012, pp. 295–312.

14 Osler: *Higher Education*.

15 Veugelers, Wiel/De Groot, Isolde: "Theory and Practice of Citizenship Education," in: Wiel Veugelers/Fritz Oser (eds.), *Education for Democratic Intercultural Citizenship (= Moral Development and Citizenship Education 15)*, Leiden/Boston: Brill 2019, pp. 14–41, p. 14.

16 Banks, James A.: "Human Rights, Diversity, and Citizenship Education," in: *The Education Forum* 73 (2009), pp. 100–110.

17 Banks: *Human Rights*.

18 Abdi, Megersa Tolera: "The Role of Peace-Education as a Coexistence, Reconciliation and Peace-Building Device in Ethiopia," in: *The Electronic Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2/2019, pp. 61–74.

ers” and where seeking knowledge is an intersection of their own ideas, belief and values with those of others.¹⁹ In other words, the questions of “who am I?” and “what do I think and why?” are insufficient as they should also be asked reciprocally with other members of one’s community. This notion is particularly interesting when relating it to populism, as members of communities can be different, and it posits that in order to understand one’s self it is necessary to understand all surrounding people. This can increase awareness, reduce fear, build solidarity and strengthen social cohesion.

Because schools are also considered communities and places of contact, they play a significant role in embedding values and norms.²⁰ In our definition of education on “living together,” the second component focused on strengthening the spirit of initiative and active participation. Similarly, Westheimer identifies three versions of “good citizens” that I will apply to frame Adyan Foundation’s educational “Alwan” programme:

- Personally-responsible citizens are the ones who respect the law, volunteer, are honest, respectful and self-confident.
- Participatory citizens do not merely volunteer, but participate in the organization of events, meaning that they are active in civic affairs and social life.
- Social justice-oriented citizens are the ones who are always seeking to find ways to improve their societies. They volunteer and organize, but they also ask the difficult questions to try to find the root causes of problems.

Therefore, developing educational programs that create active social justice-oriented citizens is extremely important to change attitudes and behavior towards diversity, increase the scope of who “the people” are and eventually de-legitimize discriminatory and divisive populist narratives.

“Alwan” (meaning colors) is a non-formal educational programme run by Adyan Foundation since 2007 in both public and private schools all over Lebanon. It provides young people between the ages of 15 and 17 with lessons aimed at promoting “living together” through active and inclusive citizenship,

19 Splitter, Laurence J.: “Enriching the Narratives we Tell about Ourselves and our Identities: An Educational Response to Populism and Extremism,” in: *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 54 (2020), pp. 21–36.

20 Westheimer, Joel: “Civic Education and the Rise of Populist Nationalism,” in: *Peabody Journal of Education* 94 (2019), pp. 4–16.

developing resilience to face extremist and sectarian narratives, and spreading awareness on the importance of participating in public life to promote human dignity and inclusive sustainable development. In particular, the programme is centered around three key concepts: religious diversity, partnership, and community service. The programme curriculum is delivered in the form of extracurricular clubs of 15 to 20 members and includes a blended learning approach between structured classroom and experimental sessions. It also includes debates, an inter-club excursion to discover the Lebanese heritage and a cross-communitarian social project. As is evident, the programme works on two layers, namely knowledge and action.

In 2021, Adyan Foundation commissioned Ecorys – a research and consultancy company – to undertake a two-year-long evaluation of the Alwan programme. Based on the initial – and not yet published – draft of the mid-line report, this impact evaluation is being developed using qualitative interviews with a variety of programme stakeholders, combined with a quantitative survey to be completed by participants and non-participants of the programme. The main objective is to evaluate the actual impact of the programme twelve years after its start in 2019 to ascertain whether it fulfilled its objectives of developing knowledgeable, inclusive and active citizens.

Based on the initial results, it became clear to us that the programme remained relevant to the Lebanese context throughout, especially through its focus on teachings and practices of other religions and its promotion of inter-religious understanding and FoRB. In addition, it performed extremely well in bringing people together, especially through excursions and community service initiatives that broke “barriers,” which are – more often than not – used to ignite dormant or new conflicts. There were also strong stories of change that have been gathered by students and teachers showing clear improvements in Alwan participants’ attitudes, behavior, and knowledge regarding diversity and “living together.” Naturally, there are some areas that also need improvement, including – but not limited to – updating the curriculum to become more reflective of new changes, finding better strategies to record change, increasing the element of contact, and better engaging other stakeholders such as parents to ensure that the educational process does not end in school.

Despite these discrepancies, “Alwan” remains an important example on how education on “living together” – which includes the promotion of concepts such as diversity (natural differences present in society), pluralism (the mechanism by which diversity is managed), personal and collective freedoms (including FoRB) – can develop a well-informed, active and inclusive citizen.

Such a modality will reduce the effect of populist narratives of individuals because it broadens one's definition of the "people," deconstructs the "us" versus "them" binary through promoting solidarity, and builds a "plural" society where individual identities and differences are celebrated.

What is the way forward?

In conclusion, we have seen that both diversity training and diversity education can play an important role in fostering an inclusive society and mitigating the negative effects of populism through developing knowledge, challenging stereotypes and transforming attitudes.

In order to effectively counteract negative populist narratives, I propose the series of recommendations below:

- Build the capacities of teachers, school administrators and trainers through courses on diversity, FoRB, and inclusive citizenship to help students to think critically, question, understand their environment, care about public issues and become empathetic.
- Involve parents in formal and non-formal educational programs to ensure that what students learn extends beyond the realm of the school (for those programs implemented in schools).
- Include the notions of diversity, FoRB and inclusive citizenship in existing history, social studies and religious education curricula, while taking into consideration religious, ethnic, and linguistic differences as well as the multiple understandings of citizenship and diversity.
- Create safe and respectful learning environment where students from different backgrounds can interact and listen to different perspectives through developing dialogue guidelines or "social contract."
- Work on the macro level through developing comprehensive educational policies that address the root causes of populism and promote inclusive citizenship and FoRB at all levels. This includes incorporating multicultural perspectives in textbooks, encouraging cross-cultural exchanges, and developing community service initiatives. General educational policies and guidelines such as the Toledo Guidelines and the Human Dignity Educational Program can be used as starting points.

- Integrate the content of declarations and promote FoRB and education on “living together” in a practical manner in schools, training and learning centers, places of worship, businesses and local communities.
- Increase cross-collaboration between schools and other agents of change to provide additional programs, workshops and extracurricular activities that promote FoRB and inclusive citizenship. By leveraging their expertise and resources, these organizations can contribute to well-rounded programs that refute divisive narratives and promote social cohesion.

By working together, teachers, schools, trainers, government agencies, civil society organizations and other stakeholders can collectively harness the power of formal and non-formal education to foster critical thinking, empathy and solidarity, which can become powerful weapons against exclusionary populism. However, it does not end here, as education is only one step in the development of inclusive citizenship. It would be quite simplistic for us to say that this would be sufficient to “eliminate” populism. Scholars and practitioners should be aware that there are a multitude of social, economic, religious and political factors at hand, all of which should be addressed for developing just and inclusive societies.

Social Media as a Tool against Populist Appropriation of FoRB and for Promoting FoRB? Challenges, Ideas and Strategies

Julia Bauer, Juliane Chakrabarti and Bernd Hirschberger

The words “Der ISLAM kann sich NICHT auf die Religionsfreiheit berufen!” (“ISLAM may NOT invoke freedom of religion!”) are emblazoned at the centre of a tweet by the Saxon parliamentary group of the far-right party Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD). The parliamentary group attributes this quote to the new-right professor emeritus Dr Karl Albrecht Schachtschneider, whom they had invited to a hearing in the Saxon parliament as an “expert.”¹ As of 4 May 2023, the tweet had collected a total of 191 likes. By comparison, the most popular post on the account of the Federal Government Commissioner for Freedom of Religion or Belief (@ReligionBund) counted just 68 likes at the same time.² A Facebook post by the Saxon AfD parliamentary group with the same content even collected over 1,800 likes.³ The associated YouTube video – which contains a whole series of distortions and misinterpretations of religious freedom – made it among the top 20 most viewed German-language videos on the keyword “*Religionsfreiheit*” (“religious

1 AfD-Fraktion Sachsen (@AFD_SLT): Am 31. März 2023 sprach Prof. Dr. Karl Albrecht Schachtschneider als Experte im Sächsischen Landtag zum #AfD-Gesetzentwurf für ein Kopftuchverbot in Schulen und Kindergärten (3 Apr. 2023), https://twitter.com/AfD_SLT/status/1642825189493727233, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

2 Number calculated with the following tool: <https://www.vicinitas.io/free-tools/download-user-tweets?tracker=%40ReligionBund>, accessed on: 6 Sep. 2023.

3 AfD Fraktion Sachsen: Am 31. März 2023 sprach Prof. Dr. Karl Albrecht Schachtschneider als Experte im Sächsischen Landtag zum #AfD-Gesetzentwurf für ein Kopftuchverbot (3 Apr. 2023), <https://www.facebook.com/AfD.Fraktion.Sachsen/posts/pfbid0D0SrymemxCo31wZr6YCeBczc33fytar36Rgbf1pAoTE37BgMaXWPEaSQZTeMKA7q1>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

freedom”) with over 19,400 views.⁴ The above example already indicates that the attempts of the far-right to appropriate and reinterpret religious freedom are not limited to the analogue world. Social media platforms are gratefully used, and sometimes with considerable reach. This article not only discusses how to counter populist appropriation and reinterpretation of religious freedom in the digital space, but also looks at how engagement in social media can strengthen this right to freedom.

Attacks on religious freedom in social media: Narratives and strategies

Taking a look at German-language tweets on the keyword of “religious freedom” in the spring of 2023, one can find a large number of contributions problematising religious freedom targeting religious (non-Christian) minorities.⁵ Many users claim that it is being made use of to defend or even promote religious extremism; for example the notion that a foreign ideology is being imposed on the population under the guise of religious freedom. Users cite Islamism and alleged Islamisation in particular as threats made possible by religious freedom. Some Twitter users simply reject religious freedom based on an anti-liberal attitude.

Other Twitter users see the danger of having an ideology imposed on them in current social developments and political decisions and assess this as a threat to their own religious freedom. However, this is mostly not about legitimate criticism of a disproportionate encroachment on their freedom rights, but rather using religious freedom as a defensive argument against anything that contradicts their own views. For example, they present coronavirus protection measures, climate protection measures, divergent ideas regarding gender identity and/or sexual orientation, Islam, the societal “mainstream” and supposed political correctness as a threat to religious freedom.

4 AfD-Fraktion im Sächsischen Landtag: Prof. Schachtschneider: Islam kann sich NICHT auf Religionsfreiheit berufen! (1 Apr. 2023), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FTsZl eRulYY>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

5 See the overview of a systematic content analysis of all tweets from the period 04/25/2023, 09:23 CEST to 05/05/2023, 09:23 CEST containing the term “*Religionsfreiheit*” (“religious freedom”) at the following online attachment: <https://link.transcript-open.de/9783839468272/download/001>.

Other users understand religious freedom selectively and discriminate against individual religious communities; for example by calling for unjustified restrictions on Islam in particular or even putting forward the thesis that it is not compatible with religious freedom. Frequently, users employ the form of “whataboutism” by referring to violations of religious freedom in countries where the respective religious community constitutes a majority of the population. The appropriation and reinterpretation of religious freedom often functions as a means of targeted disparagement of certain groups of people and particularly affects people of the Muslim faith.

These examples indicate that both instrumentalisation of religious freedom and ignorance about this human right are widespread. For example, religious freedom is reduced to a single aspect and other essential areas of application and aspects are implicitly or explicitly negated. For instance, the misconceptions that “freedom of religion” means “freedom from religion” or that religion must be apolitical and a purely private matter are frequently encountered. The concept of justified restrictions on religious freedom – which in turn are subject to strict criteria – is also often not properly understood.

In addition to the problematic narratives and misunderstandings listed above that (directly) refer to religious freedom, a large variety of other narratives that do not directly refer to religious freedom but are nevertheless harmful to it are also widespread. For example, hatred, misinformation and conspiracy theories are spread regarding individual religious communities, especially minorities.⁶ In Western countries, we often have to deal with anti-Semitic and Islamophobic content.⁷ Especially accounts that can be assigned to right-wing

6 Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung/Auswärtiges Amt: 2. Bericht der Bundesregierung zur weltweiten Lage der Religionsfreiheit. Berichtszeitraum 2018 bis 2019. [Second Report of the German Government on the Global Situation of Religious Freedom. Reporting Period 2018 and 2019] (Oct. 2020), pp. 65–99, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2410402/9e394a9928461b6c4aco4368b7a26af/201028-zweiter-bericht-der-bundesregierung-zur-weltweiten-lage-de-r-religionsfreiheit-data.pdf>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

7 Especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Institute for Freedom of Faith & Security in Europe observed a new wave of anti-Semitic and Islamophobic content: Rose, Hannah: Pandemic Hate: COVID-related Antisemitism and Islamophobia, and the Role of Social Media, Munich: IFFSE 2021, https://www.iffse.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/IFFSE-report-Entwurf-Doppelseiten-12_13-10-21.pdf, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

milieus spread social media posts that harm religious freedom. However, misunderstandings about religious freedom are also widespread, for example the confusion of religious freedom with freedom from religion in some emphatically secular milieus.

Overall, the reinterpretation narratives and misunderstandings about religious freedom shared on social media correlate with those from the “offline world” already analysed in the previous chapters. Social media platforms offer particularly favourable conditions for the rapid spread of problematic narratives. The fact that every social media user can also publish and disseminate content themselves (“produsage”) makes it possible for right-wing milieus – for example – to achieve high coverage even bypassing the traditional media.

Through coordinated hate campaigns and supported by “influencers” from their own milieu as well as fake accounts, corresponding actors fuel the debates, introduce problematic narratives into the discourse in a targeted manner, remind the people of them⁸ and deliberately disrupt constructive debates (for example with “derailing” tactics⁹).

Promotion of religious freedom in social media

Even though far right-wing forces sometimes succeed in dominating discourses on social media and thereby harming religious freedom, social media platforms also offer strong potential for promoting religious freedom. Ideally, own positive narratives should strengthen religious freedom. Appropriate outreach and education work have a preventive effect against attempts at populist appropriation and reinterpretation. It can be important and effective to reactively use a prepared communicative counter-strategy.

8 Kreißel, Philip/Ebner, Julia/Urban, Alexander/Guhl, Jakob: Hass auf Knopfdruck. Rechtsextreme Trollfabriken und das Ökosystem koordinierter Hasskampagnen im Netz, London/Washington D.C./Amman/Beirut/Toronto: ISD 2018, https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ISD_Ich_Bin_Hier_2.pdf, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

9 Weck, Andreas: “Derailing im Netz: Wie Diskussionen in eine völlig andere Richtung gelenkt werden” (3 Sep. 2015), <https://t3n.de/news/derailing-im-netz-636526/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

Raising awareness and providing education via social media

Social media can and must be platforms for promoting religious freedom and clearing up misunderstandings. Video-based platforms in particular offer strong potential to address issues of religious freedom in depth. However, looking at videos with the keyword “religious freedom” on the highly frequented YouTube platform,¹⁰ it is noticeable that among the videos with the highest reach, it is precisely those by (religiously) conservative or even right-wing actors that are strongly represented. In addition, some professionally produced explanatory videos – a few of them from large media companies – also feature among the top ranks. Moderate or progressive religious actors also publish videos, but they seem to have a hard time reaching more than a three-digit number of views. It is also noticeable that most of the high-reach videos focus in particular on controversial issues referring to domestic policy (such as debates on religious dress, circumcision or the question of whether services may be denied on account of religious beliefs, for example due to a negative attitude towards homosexuals). The wide-ranging references to religious freedom from the progressive side tend to focus on opposition to problematic conservative or right-wing positions and thus primarily have a reactive character. This one-sided focus reinforces the widespread misperception that religious freedom is a purely conservative issue. Polarising on the issue of religious freedom and naming only individual (domestic) irritants consequently means not working in a solution-oriented way and not paying attention to important issues such as violations of religious freedom by autocratic and totalitarian regimes worldwide.

The challenge for educational work is to break through this narrow focus and place religious freedom as a human right in the centre of society. Especially in secular societies, it must be communicated why religious freedom is not only relevant for those who see themselves as deeply religious or claim to be so. Persistence and thoroughness are as much in demand as creativity and a sense for the dynamics of discourse. The following aspects are likely to be decisive for the chance of success:

10 See keyword searches in German and English for the term “*Religionsfreiheit*” or “freedom of religion”: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=religionsfreiheit&sp=CAM%253D and https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=%22freedomof+religion%22&sp=CAM%253D, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

Human rights approach as a baseline: In order to overcome misunderstandings and avoid even replicating such misunderstandings in the course of one's own work, awareness-raising and educational work must always be based on the human rights approach. In particular, the principle of the indivisibility of human rights must be kept in mind and – where it seems appropriate – the commitment to religious freedom must be integrated into human rights education in general.

Establish partnerships: It is important not only to produce content but also consider how such content can be disseminated. Without the skills and infrastructure necessary to build a community, as well as regular and well-placed posts, it is difficult to achieve broad impact beyond a limited circle of experts. Since media professionals are also not immune to the aforementioned misunderstandings on issues of religious freedom, cooperations are needed that bring together expertise and reach. The fact that it is possible to develop formats that are not only educational but also entertaining for a larger audience is shown by individual positive exceptions that reach tens of thousands of viewers with their content, such as the YouTube series *Abdelkatie* by the Federal Agency for Civic Education.¹¹ In addition, there are other successful formats that counter prejudices and populist agitation against religious minorities, such as the *Datteltäter* YouTube channel.¹² Despite lagging behind the previously mentioned coverage, the FoRB Learning Platform offers videos with five-digit viewing figures.¹³

Adjustment to the target groups: A successful education campaign must not only reach and convince those who are already educated and convinced. There is a danger here of “preaching to the choir,” that is communicating in one's own bubble. Trust and interest are essential prerequisites for a message to be heard. Accordingly, it is important on which channel, by whom and in which style communication takes place. For example, it is unlikely that an official government campaign will reach target groups that are particularly critical of government or disenchanted with politics.¹⁴ It is also crucial that the habi-

11 Abdelkatie: RELIGIONSFREIHEIT – An was glaubst du? (20 Jun. 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8itQ38ZXlo&t=28s>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

12 <https://www.youtube.com/@datteltater>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

13 <https://www.youtube.com/@FreedomofReligionorBelief>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

14 Thus, the official advertising campaign launched by the German government for the Corona vaccination primarily appealed to people who were already convinced of the vaccination. Among sceptics, on the other hand, the campaign hardly met with any response. (Medianalyzer: Ärmel hoch oder runter: Was bei der Impfkommunikation bes-

tus and style of the message are well adapted to the target group. If this is not the case, the probability that the target group will be reached at all is low, including due to the algorithm. In the worst case, this can even lead to further alienation. For example, the message may be perceived as too “top-down,” artificially forced (“cringe”) or inauthentic, patronising or overly academic and abstract. It is also important that those sending the message are perceived as authentic and not as mere “service providers.”

Awareness raising as a cross-generational task: Young people are often portrayed as particularly vulnerable and impressionable in a negative sense. However, manipulation is not a problem exclusively for young people. On the contrary, some empirical research indicates that older people are on average even more susceptible to disinformation.¹⁵ Accordingly, there is a need for media and human rights education not only for the young but also for older generations. Mention should also be made of the large group of people who – regardless of their age – believe that they have already acquired the knowledge that they need to lead their lives and therefore hardly notice and accept learning opportunities.

Counter-measures

With the help of populist strategies, attempts are made to devalue, disparage and marginalise other people/groups. People of the Muslim and Jewish faiths are disproportionately affected in the German-language network, whereby xenophobic motives are often involved as well. This kind of hate speech is problematic in the sense that online channels now partially have an even wider reach than traditional media, reaching an incalculable number of people in a very short time, and there is a danger that hate messages might turn into actual acts of violence. In order to limit and eliminate communication that is contemptuous of people (or groups of people), an effort by society as a whole

ser sein könnte, <https://www.mediaanalyzer.com/studien/aermel-hoch-oder-runter-was-bei-der-impfkommunikation-besser-sein-koennte/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.).

- 15 Meßmer, Anna-Katharina/Sängerlaub, Alexander/Schulz, Leonie: “Quelle: Internet? Digitale Nachrichten- und Informationskompetenzen der deutschen Bevölkerung im Test” (22 Mar. 2021), <https://www.stiftung-nv.de/de/publikation/quelle-internet-digitale-nachrichten-und-informationskompetenzen-der-deutschen>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

is needed, in addition to the development and implementation of educational programmes.

Occasionally, it can be observed that social media users take action against the instrumentalisation, reinterpretation or devaluation of religious freedom with their comments and corrections. However, these reactions seem to be spontaneous and not organised. In addition, there are initiatives that generally and with different methodological approaches work against various forms of hatred, group-focused enmity and disinformation and accordingly also take organised action against anti-Semitic and Islamophobic postings. Examples of such initiatives in German-speaking countries include #ichbinhier¹⁶, the No-Hate-Speech campaign, hzsa.cyberwehr:neuland, correctiv.org, Counter Creators, Amadeu Antonio Foundation, Mimikama and HateAid.

Among other things, the initiatives mentioned use strategies of counter-speech. Counter-speech is a concept to secure freedom of expression in the long term and not primarily a measure to limit the effectiveness of individual, hateful postings. In the case of counter-speech, it is important to consider which social dynamics and psychological-cognitive effects are triggered on the users and how the input interacts with the algorithms of the social networks.

There is evidence that coordinated, well-planned counter-speech can quantitatively shift the overall discourse and that the proportion of problematic narratives becomes smaller compared to the proportion of counter-narratives after appropriate actions.¹⁷ However, it should be kept in mind that counter-speech may increase the visibility of hate comments and communication containing contempt for people. Each additional comment contributes to the algorithm's assessment of a post as significant. In the worst case, it is possible that a problematic post only receives attention and is perceived by a larger public because someone reacts with counter-speech (keyword #dontfeedthetroll). On the other hand, if radical users post particularly often and the silent majority do not contradict these posts, there is the danger that the positions and the radical minority behind them appear more significant than is actually the case. Accordingly, the challenge is to find an effective balance

16 *ichbinhier e.V.* is a civil society initiative which supports the facebook counter speech group #ichbinhier with over 40,000 volunteer members. The group is taking collective action to combat group-based enmity in the comments section.

17 Laufer, Daniel: "Neue Studie zeigt Wirksamkeit von Gegenrede im Netz" (8 Jun. 2020), <https://netzpolitik.org/2020/reconquista-internet-neue-studie-zeigt-wirksamkeit-von-gegenrede-im-netz/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

of which problematic posts are given attention, and care must be taken not to be pushed back into being purely reactive.¹⁸ Counter-speech is well suited to counteract the danger of fundamental shifts in discourse. A counter-speech strategy that does not reproduce hate are solidarity postings on behalf of victims of hate speech, especially marginalised groups.

If counter-speech is resorted to, it should be ensured that it takes an appropriate form, because not all forms of counter-speech are equally successful.¹⁹ As a general rule of thumb, aggressions should be named as such briefly and factually, and it should be made clear that misanthropic statements are not acceptable and that such views do not represent a majority in the population. However, which style is most successful in detail also depends on the specific context.²⁰

Overall, the greatest potential of counter-speech seems to lie in activating a silent majority and thereby making problematic content of a radical minority less visible.²¹ Finally, social media can also be used to mobilise for digital civic courage and raise awareness of the dangers of hate and misanthropy. The nature of the algorithms can be used in this sense to amplify positive, respectful and fact-based messages and increase their visibility compared to derogatory and hateful postings. The strategy should be adapted to the characteristics of the different algorithms of the various networks. For example, on Facebook, a well-structured use of supporting emojis is recommended.

However, it seems rather unlikely that counter-speech will also have an effect on particularly radicalised people and that they will be convinced by it. On

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- 18 Bromell, David: "Counter-Speech Is Everyone's Responsibility," in: David Bromell (ed.), *Regulating Free Speech in a Digital Age. Hate, Harm and the Limits of Censorship*, Cham: Springer 2022.
- 19 Benesch, Susan/Ruths, Derek/ Dillon, Kelly P./Haji, Mohammad Saleem/Wright, Lucas: "Considerations for successful counterspeech" (14 Oct. 2016), <https://dangerousspeech.org/considerations-for-successful-counterspeech/>, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023. However, the question of how success is defined and how it can best be measured remains crucial.
- 20 Binny, Mathew/Punyajoy, Saha/Hardik, Tharad/Subham, Rajgaria/Prajwal, Singhania/Suman, Kalyan Maity/Pawan, Goyal/Animesh, Mukherjee: "Thou Shalt Not Hate: Countering Online Hate Speech," in: *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* 13 (1/2019), pp. 369–380.
- 21 Buerger, Catherine: "#iamhere: Collective Counterspeech and the Quest to Improve Online Discourse," in: *Social Media + Society* 7 (4/2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211063843>.

the one hand, it is conceivable that speaking out counteracts the disinhibiting effects of the anonymity of the internet (“toxic online disinhibition”).²² On the other hand, it is also conceivable that radical users – out of defiance or because they perceive a threat to their identity – will stick to their problematic narratives or withdraw from the public space and resort to private groups and messenger services. The results of empirical studies tend to speak for the latter.²³

In any case, good strategic planning (constant evaluation, accurate calibration of messages) is crucial in counter-measures.²⁴ What is also discussed is the importance of good coordination and networking for counter-measures to be successful.²⁵ On the whole, further research on the efficiency of counter-speech is necessary.²⁶

Responsibility and obligations of the key stakeholders

The promotion of religious freedom and successful awareness raising, human rights education and effectiveness in the fight against ideas showing contempt

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- 22 Wachs, Sebastian/Wright, Michelle F.: “Associations between Bystanders and Perpetrators of Online Hate: The Moderating Role of Toxic Online Disinhibition,” in: *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 15 (9/2018), p. 2030, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15092030>.
 - 23 Lopez-Sanchez, Maite/Müller, Arthur: “On Simulating the Propagation and Counter-measures of Hate Speech in Social Networks,” in: *Applied Sciences* 11 (24/2021), p. 12003, <https://doi.org/10.3390/app112412003>; Saltman, Erin/Kooti, Farshad/Vockery, Karly: “New Models for Deploying Counterspeech: Measuring Behavioral Change and Sentiment Analysis,” in: *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 46 (9/2023), pp. 1547–1574.
 - 24 Winter, Charly/Fürst, Johanna: *Challenging Hate. Counter-speech Practices in Europe*, London: ICSR 2017, <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ICSR-Report-Challenging-Hate-Counter-speech-Practices-in-Europe.pdf>, accessed on: 6 Sep. 2023.
 - 25 Laubenstein, Sina/Urban, Alexander: “Case studies: which types of campaign against hate and extremism on the internet work, which do not, and why?,” in: Johannes Baldauf/Julia Ebner/Jakob Guhl (eds.), *Hate Speech and Radicalisation Online. The OCCI Research Report*, London/Washington D.C./Beirut/Toronto: ISD 2019, pp. 50–57. The authors also list networking, exchange and training as helpful factors, but are not independent in the sense that they have both worked in leadership positions on the initiatives praised in the article.
 - 26 Blaya, Catherine: “Cyberhate: A review and content analysis of intervention strategies,” in: *Aggression and Violent Behaviour* 45 (2019), pp. 163–172.

for humanity requires that all relevant stakeholders take responsibility and fulfil their duties.²⁷ Moreover, showing solidarity with marginalised groups and protecting them should be one of their most important concerns.

More digital civic courage

Every social media user can make a contribution in the form of digital civic courage. For example, individuals and communities can increase the visibility of positive posts by commenting, liking, saving, forwarding and reposting/sharing them abundantly in a positive and laudatory manner. In addition, users can report posts that violate the guidelines of the social media platforms and – in the case of criminal content – file charges. This requires civil society activism and empowerment of the actors to counteract a fight against wind-mills, isolation, coordinated attacks and a possible digital burn-out.

Responsibility of (traditional and new) media

Media professionals and providers have a special responsibility, being challenged to take on a role as multipliers for awareness raising and human rights education. With their wide reach, they are also able to influence the generations that are no longer at school. Media creators and providers can also promote awareness raising, human rights education and the fight against inhuman ideas by giving a wide reach. For example, it would be conceivable for established influencers to draw attention to populist appropriations and reinterpretations of religious freedom and other human rights in “expose” and “reaction” formats. In order to avoid contributing to the spread of misunderstandings or producing (unintentionally) misleading presentations, a profound understanding of human rights is necessary for all media makers.²⁸

27 Regarding the responsibility of the churches and religious communities, see Blaya: *Cyberhate*, pp. 163–172.

28 In order to generate awareness and impart the necessary knowledge and skills, it might be helpful to organise workshops on human rights basics for multipliers such as journalists (e.g. the community toolkit by *ichbinhier e.V.* “Hass im Netz – Toolkit für Communities” can be used for both media makers from the traditional media sector and high-reach formats in social media like YouTubers). On the one hand, content basics could be conveyed precisely and comprehensively so that they are understood and internalised. On the other hand, they could be motivated to become creative, to

It is also important not to consider online and offline separately: misunderstandings take root across media boundaries and digital hatred may lead to physical violence and serious psychological consequences. Conversely, appearances in traditional media, in parliaments and at demonstrations also provide ammunition for the digital world. The traditional media are therefore also called upon to critically question their media logics and stop problematic patterns such as “false balance” and sensationalism. In addition, their own reporting should be critically evaluated with a view to balance; for example regarding the question of how often Islam is reported on and how many of the contributions are of a positive nature.²⁹ Stronger diversity in one’s own editorial team may also be helpful. In addition, it is important to establish human rights as a cross-cutting issue in journalism and use language that is sensitive to discrimination.

Responsibility of platform operators and issues of legal regulation

In some cases, narratives of instrumentalisation, reinterpretation or devaluation of religious freedom are also formulated in connection with statements that hold criminal relevance (defamation, slander, insult or incitement to hatred). In such cases, it is to be expected of the operator platforms that they fulfil their legally prescribed obligations (obligations to delete, cooperation with law enforcement authorities) as long as the underlying laws are in conformity with human rights. The state in turn also has to ensure that these obligations are fulfilled.³⁰ Social media corporations should also ensure that their algorithms do not privilege problematic or even illegal content; for example by rewarding

develop different formats and forms in order to pass on appropriate content to their own audience.

- 29 See also Media Tenor: Das Medienbild zum Islam treibt die Angst, <http://de.mediatenor.com/de/bibliothek/newsletter/1100/das-medienbild-zum-islam-treibt-die-angst-bedford-strohm-und-papst-franziskus-setzen-positive-akzente-fuer-ihre-kirchen>, accessed on: 6 Sep. 2023.
- 30 However, care must always be taken that the prevention of the dissemination of illegal content is not given greater importance than the protection of human rights such as freedom of expression, information or the press; see also the justified concerns of Reporters Without Borders Germany about the Network Enforcement Act: Reporter ohne Grenzen: NetzDG führt offenbar zu Overblocking (27 Jul. 2018), <https://www.reporter-ohne-grenzen.de/pressemitteilungen/meldung/netzdg-fuehrt-offenbar-zu-overblocking>, accessed on: 6 Sep. 2023.

polarisation with higher visibility. Moreover, it should be ensured that social media corporations do not stint on basic security and moderation tasks simply because they incur additional costs.³¹

Protection of human rights defenders

It is also a cross-cutting task for all actors to ensure the protection of human rights defenders. People who stand up for human rights often become the target of attacks themselves. For example, human rights defenders are attacked (in a coordinated manner) in the form of “silencing” to keep them from talking and discourage further users from also campaigning for human rights issues.³² Attackers often resort to diversionary tactics such as “gaslighting”³³ or “whataboutism.” Since attacks are to be expected, the accompaniment of human rights education and advocacy campaigns holds particular importance. Only close moderation over a longer period of time can ensure clear messages, otherwise further attacks and a “broken window effect” quickly occur: if there is no negative reaction to hate comments, the impression is created that such behaviour will go unpunished, which in turn can attract further authors of hate comments, while other people to whom the campaign is actually directed are deterred.

Conclusion

In order to promote religious freedom and counteract communication that is contemptuous of human beings as well as populist attempts at appropriation and reinterpretation in the digital space, awareness-raising and educational work should receive comprehensive support. In doing so, existing approaches to human rights and media education should be taken up and

31 Lauer, David: “Facebook’s ethical failures are not accidental; they are part of the business model,” in: *AI Ethics* 1 (4/2021), pp. 395–403.

32 Geschke, Daniel/Klaßen, Anja/Quent, Matthias/Richter, Christoph: #Hass im Netz: Der schleichende Angriff auf unsere Demokratie. Eine bundesweite repräsentative Untersuchung, ed. by Institut für Demokratie und Zivilgesellschaft (IDZ), Juni 2019, https://blog.campact.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Hass_im_Netz-Der-schleichende-Angriff.pdf, accessed on: 8 Aug. 2023.

33 “Gaslighting” means systematic questioning/doubting/small-talking about the experiences/facts/truths of a person or a group of people.

modern (counter-)strategies developed that also focus on solidarity with those affected. Both should definitely be done thoroughly and not simply symbolically. In this sense, long-term, sustainable funding must be provided for corresponding initiatives instead of promoting many short-term projects that do not have an impact beyond the symbolic. It is also crucial that the online and offline worlds are always thought of together. There remains a strong need for research on the dynamics of digital populism and corresponding counter-measures, and especially research on the question of the effectiveness of counter-strategies is still in its infancy.

Conclusion: The Case of Religious Freedom and Populism

What Perspectives Can We Develop for a Constructive Culture of Discussion and Problem-Solving as well as Strengthening Human Rights?

Bernd Hirschberger and Katja Voges

In this anthology, the authors have described and analysed, from various perspectives, how right-wing populists and extremists around the world try to appropriate religious freedom for their own purposes and reinterpret this in line with their inhuman ideologies and anti-democratic objectives. In the process, it has been demonstrated which societal and political dynamics favour the success of corresponding strategies of appropriation. In addition, the authors have discussed counterstrategies and presented possible courses of action.

Within the framework of this project, we have focused on the human right of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), which is particularly exposed to the appropriations described above. However, it also becomes apparent that this phenomenon is part of a comprehensive interpretive struggle for reading and shaping normative foundations of social co-existence at both national and international level. Other concepts and terms that are highly relevant to human rights – such as democracy, peace, and the interests of certain population groups such as workers – are also targeted by populist appropriation and reinterpretation attempts. The appropriation and reinterpretation often follow very similar patterns to those described in this book. In this sense, the analysis of the appropriation and reinterpretation of religious freedom can also be understood as an exemplary case study for a populist appropriation and reinterpretation of human rights concepts and language in general.

The analyses presented in this book also offer lessons on how to deal with populism in general. Conclusions can be drawn on how constructive discourse

on controversial issues can be conducted without compromising and damaging human rights. While political parties, media professionals, lobby groups and religious communities have a special responsibility due to their particularly influential roles, ultimately all democrats have a duty to contribute to constructive discussions. In this sense, the following reflections and conclusions are addressed to all of these people acting in different areas of society and in different roles:

Forming new, broad alliances

Protecting and strengthening human rights requires broad-based alliances and democrats working together constructively:

- **Interacting respectfully:** Unlike right-wing populists and extremists, democrats should never fundamentally deny each other the competence and integrity to stand up for human rights, such as religious freedom. Even if populists deliberately resort to personal attacks in debates, democrats should maintain a rational and respectful discourse among themselves. Permanent disputes on side issues, chaos and a poisoned debate ultimately merely benefit populism and harm democracy and human rights.
- **Giving human rights as common ground priority over politicisation:** While it is legitimate (and sometimes necessary) to debate whether enough is being done for the protection and promotion of FoRB and other human rights, as well as what are the most effective means, there must always be consensus among all democrats that the promotion and protection of human rights is a shared goal that takes priority over party and power-political considerations and interests. Thus, the political debate should not revolve around the question of whether to protect and promote FoRB and other human rights but rather what the most effective means are to achieve this.
- **Moving away from treating human rights as a niche topic and from clientelistic thinking:** We need to break free from the prevalent stereotype that religious freedom is solely a right for the devout and conservative. Just as women's rights do not exclusively belong to the left, religious freedom should not be confined to the conservatives alone. Quite the contrary, the diversity of the human right to religious freedom – which is intended to be a universal right protecting and empowering every single human being

- should be explored and used as inspiration for innovative human rights initiatives.
- **Showing political presence and ambition and defining own priorities and initiatives instead of withdrawing:** Liberals, leftists, greens, social democrats and other progressive or secular-oriented forces should not let prejudices and far-right appropriation and reinterpretation deter them from an active commitment to FoRB. A withdrawal without comment – as seen, for example, in the case of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance in the European Parliament – only plays into the distorting far-right narrative that they are the sole political force concerned with religious freedom.
 - **Developing discussion and policy-making formats beyond confrontation:** Democrats should work together to strengthen FoRB, putting aside divisions into different political camps and interest groups. Confrontational debates tend to create entrenched positions and often hinder democratic cooperation, which is essential for strengthening human rights. Actors such as the Christian Democrats – who in many places identify particularly strongly with the commitment to the promotion and defence of FoRB – should seek exchange with social democratic, green, leftist and liberal colleagues to develop cross-party plans to strengthen this human right. In turn, the latter are called upon to take up serious offers of dialogue. Differences of opinion must not lead to a refusal of exchange, unless the counterpart represents ideas aimed at fighting the very foundations of liberal democracy. It is also worthwhile to explore thematic facets beyond one's own party-political horizon and approach to FoRB.
 - **Discovering synergies beyond the usual contacts:** When engaging in the promotion of FoRB and human rights as a whole, it is worthwhile to think beyond one's familiar network of contacts. For instance, cross-sector collaboration can expand the reach of one's own work to promote FoRB beyond the circle of one's own contacts and milieus close to oneself and create synergies in the protection and promotion of various different human rights. For example, a joint campaign by the Pontifical Mission Society *missio* and the German section of Reporters Without Borders advocating for the release of the imprisoned Vietnamese blogger and Catholic priest Nguyen

Van Ly promoted both freedom of information and FoRB.¹ Interesting initiatives have also been taken to leverage synergies between the promotion of FoRB and gender equality.² Ecumenical and interreligious cooperation can also enhance the impact of efforts to safeguard and promote FoRB. Furthermore, it can strengthen FoRB in a unique way when secular humanists and religious communities work together.

Strengthening human rights education

Comprehensive and quality human rights education is essential:

- **Demonstrating the significance of human rights in everyday life:** While there is broad consensus that human rights are good and important, many people have limited knowledge of fundamental human rights concepts. A significant number of people perceive human rights as having little relevance to their everyday lives.³ The question of whether religious freedom is still necessary in secularised societies often arises. Therefore, it is crucial to convey the significance of human rights as vividly and concretely

1 *missio* Aachen: *missio* und Reporter ohne Grenzen gemeinsam für verfolgte Christen in Vietnam (1 Feb. 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-bEDHoMjBU>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023.

2 Stefanus Alliance International: Freedom of Religion or Belief for everyone: Women in focus, 2021, <https://www.stefanus.no/english/women-and-forb/>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023; The Danish Institute for Human Rights: Freedom of religion or belief, gender equality and the SDGs 2019–2020, <https://www.humanrights.dk/research-project/freedom-religion-belief-gender-equality-sdgs>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023; Track 2 of the Danish Government's strategy to promote freedom of religion or belief and protection of religion or belief minorities: <https://um.dk/en/foreign-policy/office-of-the-special-representative-for-freedom-of-religions-or-belief>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023.

3 Ipsos Public Affairs: Human Rights in 2018. A Global Advisory Survey, <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2018-07/human-rights-in-2018-ipsos-global-advisor.pdf>, accessed on: 2 Aug. 2023 (Given the chosen wording of the question on p. 4, a social-desirability bias is possible, so that the actual gaps in knowledge could be even wider); European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights: Fundamental Rights Survey 2020, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union 2020, http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-fundamental-rights-survey-human-rights-summary_en.pdf, pp. 3ff., long version: http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-fundamental-rights-survey-human-rights_en.pdf, accessed on: 2 Aug. 2023.

as possible, ideally in a way that allows individuals to establish immediate connections to their own daily lives and their unique personal realities.

- **Educating about common misconceptions:** One objective of strengthening human rights education should also be to clarify common misconceptions about human rights. Especially regarding religious freedom, many such misconceptions exist. For example, in secularised societies, freedom of religion is often confused with a freedom from religion that only tolerates religion in the private sphere. Another common misconception is to reduce religious freedom for the protection of cultural identities.
- **Tailoring human rights education and communication to target audiences:** To successfully impart knowledge and simultaneously achieve socio-emotional competence development, diverse methodologies and didactics need to be applied and adapted to the individual target audiences in each case. This applies to both formal educational settings and informal learning environments.
- **Bringing together expertise and outreach through cooperation:** A significant, largely untapped potential lies in bridging academic expertise from the scholarly community with the outreach and media skills of media professionals. In this way, formats can be developed that are not only educational and entertaining but also reach audiences beyond the academic world.
- **Strengthening media literacy across all age groups:** To build resilience against disinformation, raise awareness against misunderstandings and reveal and overcome prejudices that often severely harm human rights, media literacy must be enhanced across all age groups.
- **Promoting empathy and solution-oriented thinking:** Human rights education should not be limited to highlighting injustices but should also teach skills and strategies for problem-solving. Journalistic and activist contributions on and to human rights should also focus on problem-solving approaches and not stop at the typical approach of “naming and shaming.”

Choosing constructive language

Democrats should practice an appropriate rhetoric and pay attention to using constructive language:

- **Do not adopt right-wing populist language:** Under no circumstances should democrats align their own language with right-wing populist rhetoric or adopt far-right populist narratives. For instance, this includes not using terms like “wokeness” as an alleged threat to religious freedom or endorsing Islamophobic slogans and conspiracy theories. Studies⁴ have not only shown that this is unlikely to be successful in containing support for far-right parties, but it also contributes to undermining and eroding human rights concepts and normalising extremist and dehumanising ideas and narratives.
- **Communicate concretely, vividly, understandably, sincerely and in a solution-oriented manner:** In public discourse on human rights, it is crucial to communicate concretely, vividly, understandably, sincerely, and with a focus on solutions. There is great potential for improvement in this regard without resorting to populist simplifications. Particularly when dealing with the often-inaccessible legal jargon, a “translation” into a language that can be understood in the context of the audience’s prior knowledge and everyday life is necessary. Technical terms and concepts such as *forum externum* or *forum internum* cannot simply be assumed as common knowledge. There is also often a great deal of confusion regarding the question of permissible limitations on human rights and the limits on the scope of such limitations.⁵ It is also important to avoid using clichéd language that shies away from commitment beyond purely symbolic acts, especially when political or financial costs are involved. Decision-makers must not hesitate to address problems only because some segments of their supporter base might perceive any approaches to solution as an imposition. Such fearful inaction and self-restraint not only leave opportunities for the promotion of human rights untapped but also contribute to the perception of political ineffectiveness, which populist actors often criticise democrats for.
- **Remain precise, avoid ambiguity:** At the same time, it is important to use precise language. Ambiguous or vague formulations should be avoided,

4 See e.g. Lewandowsky, Marcel/Wagner, Aiko: “Fighting for a Lost Cause? Availability of Populist Radical Right Voters for Established Parties. The Case of Germany,” in: Representation 59 (3/2023), pp. 485–512; Krause, Werner/Cohen, Denis/Abou-Chadi, Tarik: “Does accommodation work? Mainstream party strategies and the success of radical right parties,” in: Political Science Research and Methods Bd. 11 (1/2023), pp. 172–179.

5 Compare the German concepts of *Schranken* and *Schranken-Schranken*.

even if it is a strategy to avoid commitment or assumption of responsibility. If there is indeed a significant uncertainty or a gap in knowledge, it is better to acknowledge it as such. The use of formulations that consciously or unconsciously arouse resentments is particularly problematic. For example, if the term “political Islam” is used synonymously with the term “Islamist extremism” (an equation that does not typically occur with the terms “Christian democracy” and “Christian fundamentalism”), this highlights Islamist extremism as a problem, but at the same time also falsely suggests that political engagement motivated by Muslim faith is generally problematic. Such false generalisations not only trivialise the actual extremist threat but also fuel prejudice against non-extremist Muslims and thus create an atmosphere that can in turn be exploited by Islamist extremists for spreading hatred.

- **Do not spread untruths:** Unlike populists and extremists, democrats should take particular care not to consciously or unconsciously contribute to the spread of untruths, misleading representations and false generalisations and prejudices. For example, churches, politicians and the media should beware of falling for phantom debates such as debates about an alleged renaming of Christmas markets and St. Martin’s processions. When democrats take a stand in such debates, they should first check whether any serious proposal related to the claim actually even exists at all to avoid replicating disproven⁶ conspiracy theory narratives. Indeed, if democrats attack political competitors or religious minorities using misinformation, this not only fuels prejudice but also destroys trust in democracy.
- **Shape the political agenda yourself, develop and present own content:** Instead of only reacting to populist initiatives and external events, democrats should proactively initiate human rights-related discourses and present their own ideas and approaches for solutions, making visible constructive democratic perspectives. For instance, churches can rectify the often-distorted term “Christian values” used by far-right groups by highlighting their own understanding of the term, making it clear that love for one’s neighbour and mercy are at the core of Christian values. At the same time, they should engage in a manner that authentically embodies these values, making them tangible. Churches can also use their Christian holidays to

6 For fact-checking, see <https://www.mimikama.org/klarstellung-zu-st-martin/> and <https://www.belltower.news/die-4-besorgt-buerger-theorien-an-denen-man-merkt-dass-weihnachten-vor-der-tuer-steht-46042/>, accessed on: 2 Aug. 2023.

become visible in the public sphere and invite participation beyond their inner circles.

- **Break out of the negativity bias and create positive visibility for minorities:** In order to prevent paralysing feelings – such as feeling powerless, overwhelmed, anxious and disillusioned – from becoming dominant, public debates and media coverage should not be limited to the confrontation with disasters and scandals but also provide space for success stories, proposals for solutions and signs of hope. For example, reporting in Western Europe on Muslims should not be limited to reports on extremist violence and Islamist threats or on xenophobic and Islamophobic violence or discrimination; rather, positive contributions of the religious communities to the societal life should receive increased visibility.

Finding solutions to problems in a level-headed and evidence-based way

Solution-finding processes should be participatory and comprehensible as well as factual and evidence-based:

- **Establish differentiated problem descriptions:** Problems should be named clearly. However, policymakers, media professionals and other people in positions of responsibility in particular should refrain from sensationalism and dramatisation and attach importance to a differentiated and evidence-based description and assessment of problems. In order to create a better basis for planning, it is advisable – for instance – to differentiate between violations of FoRB according to their severity. This is also important because it devalues the term “persecution” if even comparatively mild cases of discrimination are labelled as such. Caution must also be exercised when using numerical data in human rights reporting (rankings comparing the human rights situation in different countries, figures on the number of people affected by human rights violations, etc.). This cannot be done in a serious and reliable way without providing context and transparently describing the limits and inaccuracies of the methodology.
- **Promote quality reporting and sustainability of action:** Even in an era where live updates and breaking news are increasingly prevalent, thoroughness should take precedence over speed and quantity. In project planning and grant allocation, implementing a smaller number of projects

of high quality and impact in a sustainable manner should be favoured over a mass of short-lived projects that can at best provide short-lived, merely symbolic accents. Solving complex problems requires persistence and effort beyond short-term peaks of media attention and waves of outrage. Media professionals have a special responsibility to realise such a standard.

- **Move away from a culture of polarisation and outrage, and focus on concrete projects instead of empty words and pure symbolism:** The far right must not be allowed to dictate the political agenda for the entire society. The vociferous culture wars fuelled by the far right which often aim in particular at symbolic politics (for example prolonged debates about diversity and inclusive language guidelines, often based on false allegations) divert attention from more pressing issues and make it difficult to sincerely discuss legitimate and relevant issues of contention.⁷ Democrats should not engage in such culture wars and instead name their own priorities for public debate and bring realistic proposals for solutions into the discussion.
- **Be critical but have humility and appreciation for expertise instead of considering oneself an expert on everything and falling for an overestimation bias:** Especially in agitated debates, it is crucial to recognise the limits of one's own knowledge and differentiate wisely between opinion and knowledge. The mass of information available via a short internet search query tempts people to see themselves as experts on almost everything, whether football, virology or security policy. Thorough research requires considerable effort. Mere opinion pieces are certainly not an adequate substitute for sound analysis, and critical source evaluation is more important than ever in the digital age.

7 How can religious minorities in distress be better supported internationally? How can religious and ideological radicalisation be dealt with? How can anti-Semitic and other misanthropic attitudes in migrant and non-migrant populations be effectively counteracted and prevented? How can integration be promoted? How can measures to protect domestic security be designed to be effective but also proportionate? How can a cooperative relationship between the state and religious communities be implemented without favouring individual religious groups or the state exerting undue influence on the internal affairs of religious communities?

Cultivating a constructive approach to fears and distresses

Fears (and other negative emotions) can be a helpful warning sign, but they can also be misused as a pretext or excuse and have a paralysing or even destructive effect. Accordingly, a constructive approach to fears is necessary to effectively address actual hardships:⁸

- **Take each other seriously and recognise the (im)possibilities for discussion:**⁹ A liberal democratic society thrives on the fact that there is room for different opinions as well as tensions and conflicts. The exchange between people and groups with different views, opinions and backgrounds can even be productive. However, the prerequisite is the willingness to engage with other – sometimes even contrary – views and the acknowledgement of human dignity. Accordingly, it is important to distinguish between sincere concerns and selfish manipulative instrumentalisations of fear. It must also be clear that an attitude of openness must not mean feigning understanding for problematic thoughts, simply recognising and approving everything and trivialising inhuman positions. On the contrary, taking people seriously also means highlighting contradictions and problematic consequences of their views.
- **Provide inclusive space for community and identity building as well as for the endowment with meaning:** Religious communities have the potential to offer real alternatives to the harmful sham solutions that populism and extremism offer to people searching for identity, community, and meaning for their lives. In order to fulfil this crucial function, they must be perceived as trustworthy points of contact for addressing fears and sorrows, and therefore work hard to regain lost trust.
- **Prioritise support for the most vulnerable and take the affected individuals seriously:** At international, national and local levels, special attention should be given to those who objectively need help the most. Commitment to the most vulnerable must be authentic and should not be driven by self-

8 See also Justice and Peace Europe: Facing our Fears and re-connecting the World. Concerted Action 2023 – Summary, <http://www.juspax-eu.org/en/dokumente/Summary-Concerted-Action-2023-2024.pdf>, accessed on: 25 Aug. 2023.

9 See also Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz (ed.): Dem Populismus widerstehen. Arbeitshilfe zum kirchlichen Umgang mit rechtspopulistischen Tendenzen (= Arbeitshilfen Nr. 305), Bonn 2019, p. 72.

interest or instrumentalised for the sake of positive self-presentation, attracting political support, or economic gain. For example, it leaves a bitter taste when the sponsor of an aid project for Christians in the Global South releases a glossy promotional video consisting of a string of words of gratitude from the beneficiaries but does not leave room for the personal perspectives of those affected.

Leave no room for extremism and hate

As extremism and right-wing populism aim to sabotage constructive debates and solution finding, it is important not to leave any space for these forces:

- **Do not offer populism and extremism a stage:** Representatives of right-wing populist and extremist parties and groups should not be offered a stage to spread their inhuman narratives, including at church events. Media and other societal actors should also develop strategies against instrumentalisation of their discourse platforms and formats from the far right and particularly avoid a false balance that presents dubious positions as equivalent and gives them legitimacy.
- **Object strategically:** Transgressive behaviour must also be clearly named as such. If there is a danger of a fundamental shift in discourse through hate speech and disinformation, counter-speech should be developed and deployed. However, counterstrategies must be well planned and coordinated. It is particularly important to ensure that countermeasures do not simply lead to problematic narratives receiving attention in the first place.
- **Resist and counteract normalisation or relativisation:** Right-wing populist, far-right extremist and inhuman ideas must never be normalised or relativised. If attempts are made to camouflage such views as “bourgeois” or “conservative,” this must be clearly contradicted at all levels of society.
- **Use well-founded instead of emotion-driven criticism:** Even if the content of right-wing populist and far-right extremist narratives is outrageous, criticism should be as factual and level-headed as possible. By contrast, purely emotion-driven or polemical reactions should be avoided as this only provides populists with targets for further attacks.
- **Protect and support human rights defenders, strengthen (digital) civic courage:** Effective measures must be taken to ensure the protection of human rights defenders. For example, if church members who advocate

for church reform processes receive death threats,¹⁰ this must not only be condemned in no uncertain terms but also have consequences under criminal law. Civic courage must also be promoted in the digital space.

The list of recommendations – which are based on the analyses and research results of the authors of this volume – is not to be understood as exhaustive. However, the recommendations show where political and civil society actors, media professionals, representatives of religious communities and society as a whole have the opportunity and the responsibility to resolutely counter populist appropriations and instrumentalisations of the human right to religious freedom and other human rights. Further studies of individual options for action as well as comparative analyses of the appropriation and reinterpretation of other human rights are desirable.

Further facets of the struggle for the interpretation of human rights illustrated by the example of religious freedom

The case studies in this book have focused on a particular type of appropriation and reinterpretation of religious freedom that is especially relevant in “Western” countries, namely the appropriation by right-wing populist and extremist forces. However, other actors who are not usually classified as “far-right extremists” or “right-wing populists” in the narrow sense of the terms also endanger FoRB in various regions of the world, questioning its character as a universal right to freedom:

- The **narrative of threatened religious (traditional) values** that need to be defended – especially against the backdrop of globalisation and secularisation – is widespread worldwide. In many countries, nationalists in particular use and fuel this narrative, including without direct reference to religious freedom. This defence of alleged “Christian values” can be observed in many countries with a Christian majority, especially in Europe, America and Africa. Likewise, radical Islamists and Islamist-oriented state leaders

10 See e.g. Kirche und Leben: “Drei prominente Katholikinnen und ihr Umgang mit Hass und Hetze. Morddrohungen gegen Theologin Wuckelt von kirchlichen Reformgegnern” (5 Jul. 2023), <https://www.kirche-und-leben.de/artikel/morddrohungen-gegen-theologin-wuckelt-von-kirchlichen-reformgegnern>, accessed on: 2 Aug. 2023.

present themselves as defenders of Islam and its values and traditions. In India, Hindu nationalism is on the rise, which claims to protect Hindu traditions and ways of life from alleged external influences and aggressively attacks people of other faiths.

- In some cases, this narrative of defending religious values is also linked to a **postcolonial critique** that questions human rights because they are perceived as a colonial or Western construct imposed without considering other cultural traditions and schools of thought in different regions of the world. This argumentation provides a helpful excuse for autocratic and totalitarian regimes to relativise their own human rights deficiencies and violations or to exclude and reinterpret aspects of human rights that are inconvenient for them. Such arguments are particularly destructive for individuals from disadvantaged groups as they help to establish and perpetuate oppression. There is an urgent need for further research in this area taking into account the fact that the recourse to human rights in Western countries – especially during the colonial era – was associated with striking contradictions that still persist in neocolonial contexts.
- In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, it is noticeable that governments often do not speak of “religious freedom” but “religious harmony” or “religious tolerance.” However, from a human rights perspective, neither of these alternative expressions is equivalent to “freedom of religion” as the other two concepts ascribe less importance to the aspect of freedom or even suppress it altogether. However, the autocratic regimes of the region in particular benefit from such alternative framing, as it allows them to use concessions in the field of interreligious cooperation for a **branding strategy** while at the same time covering up unpleasant conflicts and problems.¹¹
- Totalitarian regimes such as the People’s Republic of China with its **Sinicization policy** pursue aggressive strategies to adapt religious communities to their own ideology and to gain total control. They spread the illusion of an unrestricted scope of action for religions in the state, while at the same time subjecting them to maximum control and suppressing op-

11 On the concepts of branding and shaming, see 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, pp. 20–32.

ponents. The aim is to secure their own rule from the outset and avoid any form of potential opposition.

- In the **context of wars and (armed) conflict**, it can often be observed that conflict parties deliberately highlight alleged and actual violations of FoRB and other human rights attributed to the opponent side in the sense of a **shaming strategy** to damage the image of their opponents and thereby reduce the willingness of third parties to support them, as well as stirring up anger against the opponent among their own supporters.

The types of problematic constellations briefly touched upon here require further research. Concrete case studies examining corresponding patterns as well as their possible connections with the right-wing populist and extremist appropriations and reinterpretations of religious freedom described in this book would be desirable.

The various problematic tendencies described above attacking the understanding of religious freedom as a human right can lead to massive damage to FoRB and human rights as a whole, and ultimately to the abolition in their current form as universal rights to freedom, which in turn facilitates concrete human rights violations. It is therefore particularly important that democrats work together and persistently to counteract such attacks. As described above, there are many opportunities to contribute to this.

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About the cover design

The cover of the book features the Human Rights Logo. The logo was selected as part of an international competition organized by the “A Logo for Human Rights” initiative. The winning design by Predrag Stakic from Serbia combines the shape of a hand with the shape of a bird (for more information, see <https://www.humanrightslogo.net/en/competition>, accessed on: 26 Oct. 2023). The design is available to everyone at no cost as an open source product for the promotion and protection of human rights. The authors have chosen the symbol for the cover of the book because the book is dedicated to exactly this goal. The book’s analyses and proposed solutions aim to make an innovative contribution to the protection and strengthening of human rights and to motivate people to engage in corresponding action. Moreover, the choice of the cover is intended to emphasize the importance of thinking about religious freedom from the logic of the universal and indivisible human rights: religious freedom is complete only as a part of human rights and, vice versa, human rights would be incomplete if religious freedom, which covers a fundamental dimension of human existence, were missing.

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