

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

The Case of the AfD

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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, Bielefeld:

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: Löbbert, 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-Entgegen-AfD-Polemiken>

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://dsserver.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/BQ600ff/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.