

Becoming non-affiliated

A mixed-methods study on leaving the Roman Catholic church in Austria

Research question

The aim of the present study is to understand the reasons why Roman Catholics drop out of church as well as the timing of this exit from a life course perspective.

In the last 50 years, a total of 1.5 million Roman Catholics have taken the decision to leave the church in Austria. Unlike believers in most other countries, Roman Catholics in Austria are obliged to pay church tax. From the age of 14, members can declare their leaving the Roman Catholic church before a public authority. This framework implies that in Austria the definition of belonging (and not belonging) is more clear-cut than in most other countries, which is advantageous for research purposes.

Theoretical perspectives and prior findings

Secularization theory: The decline of church membership is part of the secularization process at the micro-level and influenced by secularization in macro-level structures. Key developments are social differentiation, pluralization and rationalization.

Prior empirical findings:

- Relevance of the family: weak religious socialization, or a non-affiliated partner or a partner who adheres to a different religion both increase the risk of leaving the church (NL and UK), having children decreases the risk while living in cohabitation increases it (US)
- Higher education as well as the stronger exposure of highly educated persons to rationalization increases the risk of leaving (NL)
- Leaving the church is less concentrated in young adulthood than discontinued church attendance (NL)
- Church tax increases the risk of leaving for adherents that have become estranged from the church (DE)

The Roman Catholic church in Austria

Since 1960, the share of Roman Catholics has decreased from 90% to 64% in favour of the non-affiliated. By current estimations, Roman Catholics are expected to be a minority of below 50% by the middle of this century. The city of Vienna reached this proportion already more than a decade ago in 2001.

The gap between the number of regular churchgoers and those who only celebrate life's rites of passage in church is significant: 8% of the Austrian population attend a church service on Sundays while about 60-70% continue to have baptisms, first communions, confirmations and religious funerals. This gap implies a high prevalence of so-called nominal Roman Catholics. The rate of leaving the church jumped to a higher level from the 1980s. There are clear waves of leaving around the times when various scandals became public (see Fig. 1).

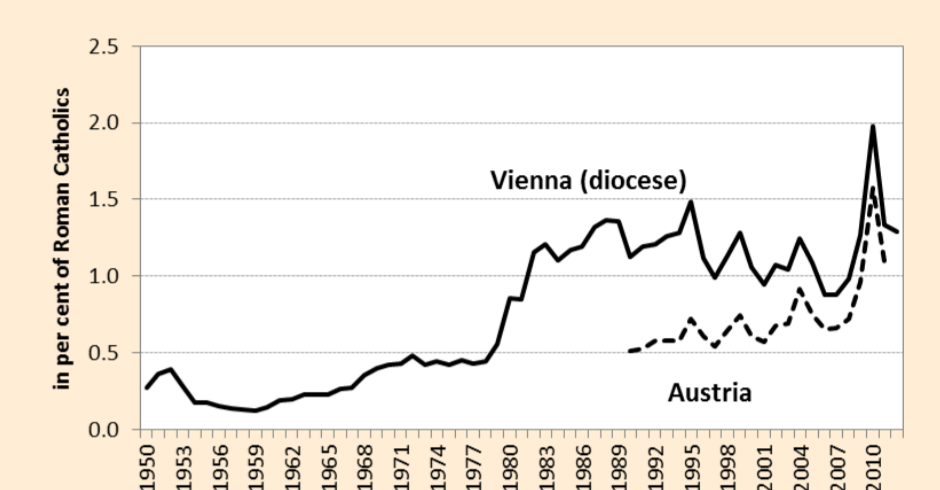


Fig. 1: Per cent of Roman Catholics leaving the church in Vienna and Austria

Data and methods

(1) Qualitative: 19 episodic interviews with former members of the Roman Catholic church were conducted and analyzed using Grounded Theory

(2) Quantitative: Austrian Generations and Gender Surveys 2008 and 2012 (panel)

Sample selection: respondents who were Roman Catholic in the first wave and either Roman Catholic or non-affiliated in the second; n=2,838 of which 188 persons (6.6%) had left the church

Method: logistic regression analysis

Results

(1) Qualitative results: process of leaving

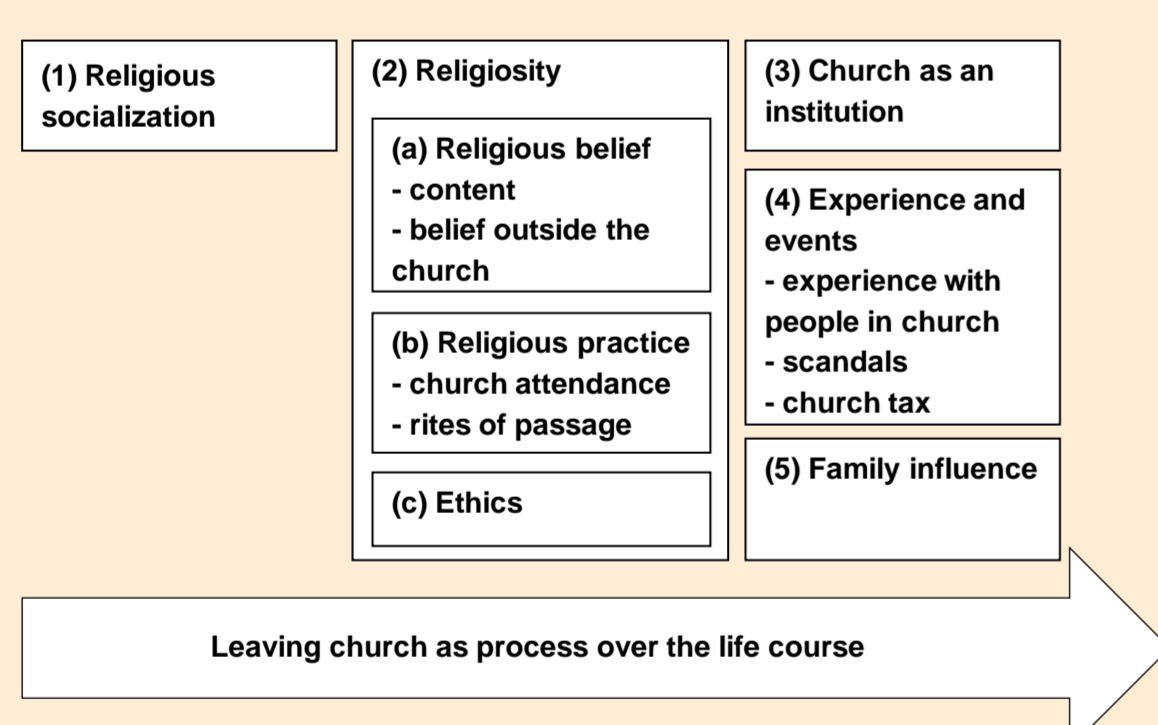


Fig. 2: Process of leaving the Roman Catholic church

Findings indicate that leaving the church needs to be understood as a process taking place over the life course. Frequently, negative experiences accumulate and finally lead to the decision of leaving.

Five aspects may be important in the process of leaving the church (see Fig. 2) and each of them can have its particular dynamics over the life course. "Religiosity" is the key category: a strong religious belief and active religious practice prevent persons from leaving the church, even despite criticism of the church, negative experiences and events, low support from the family environment and weak religious socialization.

(2) Quantitative results: predictors of leaving

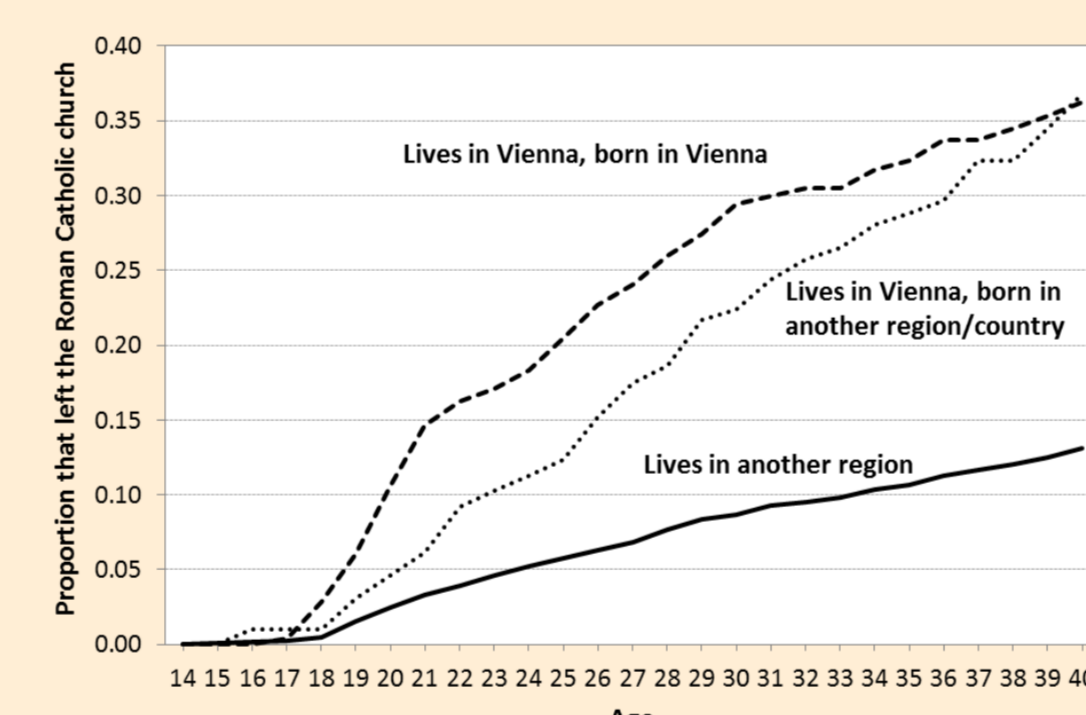


Fig. 3: Probability of leaving the church (survival curve) by residence and origin

The risk of leaving the church is highest in early adult age – particularly in Vienna – but remains high over the entire life course (see Fig. 3).

Those who leave the church are marginal members rather than disappointed core members: low religiosity and no church attendance are the strongest predictors of leaving the church (see Fig. 4). A person's religious socialization exerts an independent, significant effect net of their current level of religiosity. Celebrating a religious marriage and providing for a Christian burial ceremony prevent adherents from leaving the church. Financial considerations also play a role: entering the labour market and having to pay church tax increases the probability of leaving. Already a medium level of religious intensity lowers the risk of leaving: medium religiosity, church attendance at least once a year and medium agreement with the church ethics keep members inside the church.

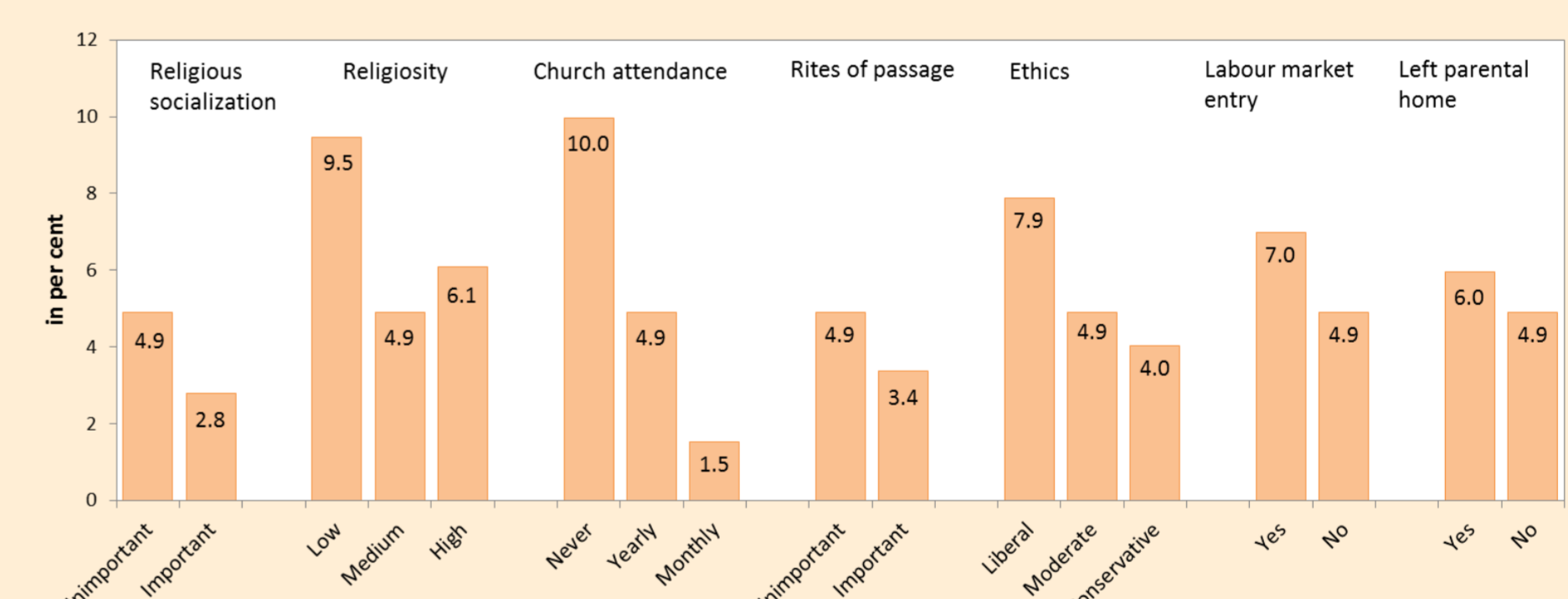


Fig. 4: Predictors of leaving the church between 2008 and 2012 (predicted probabilities from a logistic regression model)

Conclusions

- Leaving the church is a process during which typically one's own religiosity decreases and negative experiences and events (e.g. publicized scandals, personal encounters with people in church) accumulate or disagreement with the church as an institution (e.g. the role of women) gets stronger
- Low religiosity (self-assessed and measured by church attendance) is the key reason to leave, the other factors (e.g. criticism of the church, church tax, disagreement with the ethics) are mostly triggers
- Considering the celebration of rites of passage as important lowers the risk of leaving
- Church tax leads to an evaluation of one's faith and to the question whether one actually uses the "service" (cost-benefit considerations)

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