



Wittgenstein Centre

FOR DEMOGRAPHY AND  
GLOBAL HUMAN CAPITAL

***Becoming non-affiliated***  
***A mixed-methods study on leaving the Catholic church in Austria***

**Desiree Krivanek and Caroline Berghammer**

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International Institute for  
Applied Systems Analysis  
[www.iiasa.ac.at](http://www.iiasa.ac.at)



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# (1) Introduction

**Aim:** to understand the reasons why Catholics drop out of church as well as the timing of this exit from a life-course perspective

## Background

- 1.5 million Catholics left the church in the last 50 years in Austria (1960-2010)
- Leaving the church to become non-affiliated is the main driver of change in the share of Catholics (and neither religion-specific migration nor fertility) (Goujon et al. 2007)

## Church tax

- Members are obliged to pay church tax of approx. 1%
- Thus, the definition of (not) belonging is more clear-cut than in most other countries, the point in time when someone left is known (from age 14) → advantageous!

**With our study** we aim to contribute to an understanding of declining church membership that has been observed across large parts of the Western world

## Research design

- We situate leaving the church in a life-course context
- We combine qualitative and quantitative methods

## (2) Leaving the church: theoretical framework and empirical findings

- “Classic” secularisation theory

### Empirical studies on leaving the church:

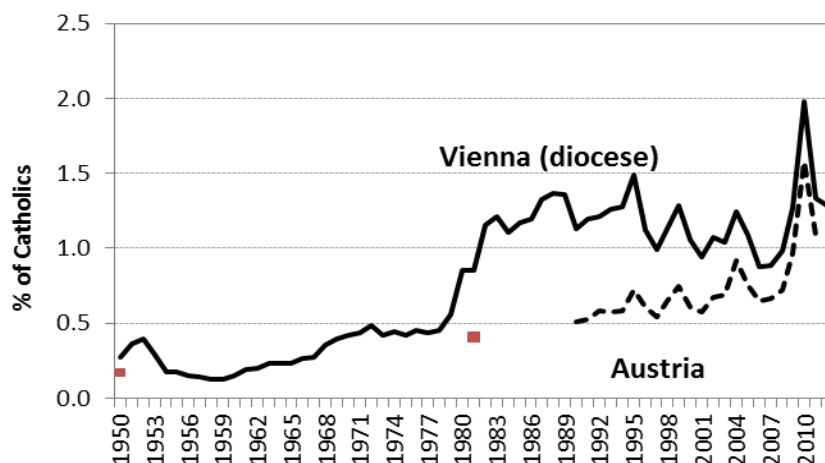
- Dutch studies based on event-history analysis: determinants (Need and de Graaf 1996; Te Grotenhuis & Scheepers 2001)
- German study on a cohort of high-school students: role of church tax (Birkelbach 1999)
- Qualitative study from Germany: six trajectories of leaving the church (Ebertz et al. 2012)
- Austrian survey: irritations and gratifications (Zulehner 2011)

## Two further strands of research inform our analysis:

- **Studies on age and cohort effects:** religious decline seems to be concentrated in young adulthood – less so for church membership (Te Grotenhuis & Scheepers 2001; McClendon & Hackett 2012)
- **Definition of religious belonging:** faithful and nominalist members (Voas and Day 2007), national culture is very influential for whether someone indicates (not) to belong to a church (Knippenberg 1998; Hout and Fischer 2002)

# (3) The Catholic church in Austria

- Religious diversity increased, in particular in Vienna
- Large gap between regular practice and passage rites: 8% of the Austrian population attend church on Sundays, 60-70% use baptism, first communion, confirmation and a religious funeral
- Rate of leaving church is high since 1980s with spikes



## (4) Data and methods

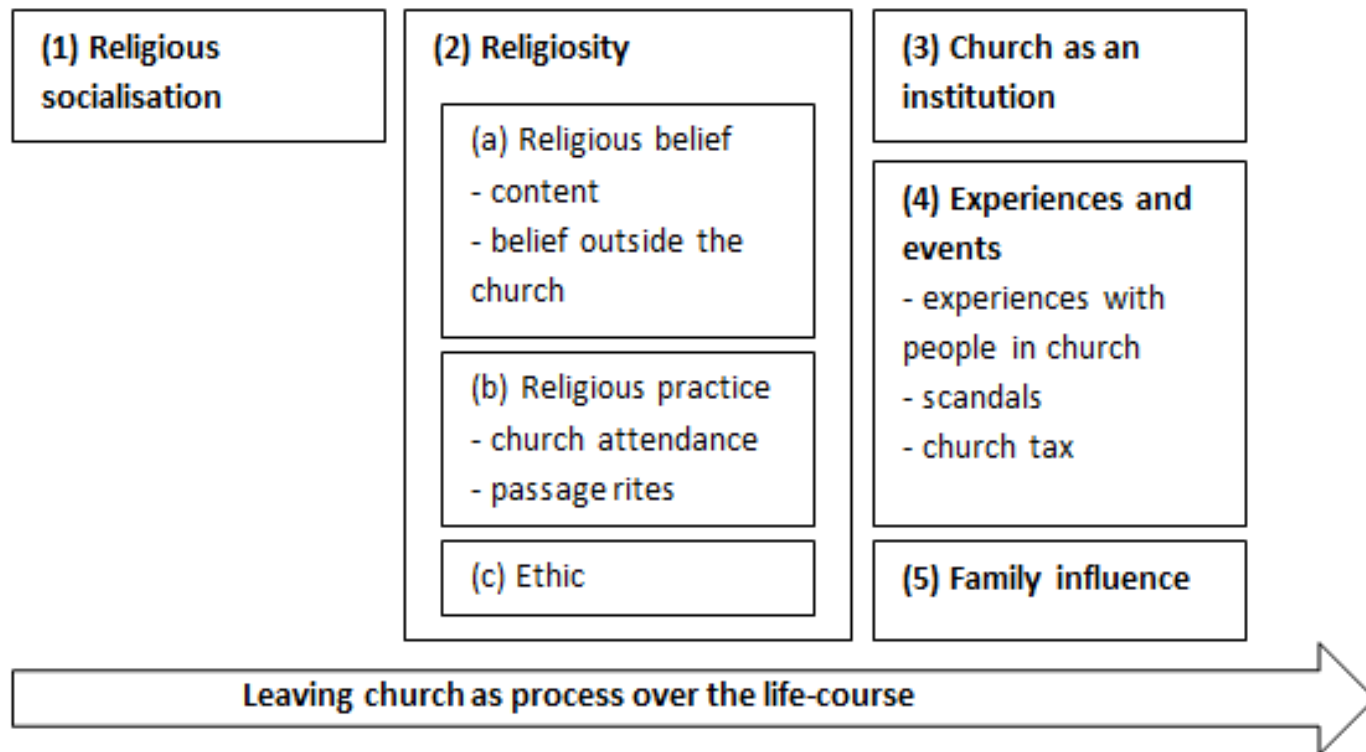
- Mixed methods: qualitative, followed by quantitative
- **19 episodic interviews** with former Catholics
- Analysed using Grounded Theory to develop a model
- **Austrian Generations and Gender Surveys 2008/09 and 2012/13** (panel)
- Respondents who were Catholic in the first wave and either Catholic or non-affiliated in the second: n=2,838 of which 188 persons (6.6%) left
- Logistic regression model



# Measurement of independent variables (at wave 1):

- **Religious socialisation:** Importance of religion in the parental home (1-3 not important, 4-5 important)
- **Religiosity:** self-assessed religiosity (1-4 low, 5-7 medium, 8-11 high)
- **Church attendance:** times per year (0 never, 1-11 yearly, 12+ monthly)
- **Passage rites:** importance of church wedding and funeral; count of very important, i.e. 4-5 on a 5-point scale; 0-1 not important, 2 important
- **Ethic:** nine family related attitudes; count of items with traditional answers, i.e. 4-5 on a 5-point scale; 0-1 modern, 2-3 medium, 4-9 traditional
- **Entry into the labour market** (yes/no)
- **Left the parental home** (yes/no)
- **Controls:** sex, age, education, region, country of birth

# (5.1) Qualitative results: process of leaving the Catholic church



- Each aspect can have its own dynamic over the life course
- „Religiosity“ is the key category

# (1) Religious socialisation

- Strong, family-based religious socialisation: attended church service on Sundays, prayed in the family, were told religious stories
- Weak, cultural religious socialisation: participated in religious education at school, celebrated Christmas and Easter in church
- Strong religious socialisation → identification with the church, sense of belonging, more religious later in life although not always in a Catholic/Christian sense

## (2) Religiosity

### (a) Religious belief

**Content:** questioned beliefs during adolescence (confirmation rite); theological content “*pure nonsense and superstition*” (male, 63); given as a reason for leaving

**Belief outside the church:** not given as reason for leaving but as justification when left for reasons other than faith

## (b) Religious practice

**Church attendance:** few had phases in their lives where they attended regularly; not an immediate trigger for leaving

**Passage rites:** if respondents did not consider them as important there was less of an obstacle to leave; did not spark reflections on their own position towards Catholic beliefs

## (c) Ethic

Critical of church views on abortion, contraception, homosexual couples, but not often a reason to leave: *“I talked with many people that told me you don’t have to take it so seriously ... either I’m in and convinced ... and so I took the decision to leave.” (female, 48)*

### (3) Church as an institution

Critical of the priests' obligation to live in celibacy, the role of women and the hierarchical structure of the church; seldom a trigger for leaving

## (4) Experiences and events

**Experiences with people in church:** contact seldom, children's passage rites (first communion) an occasion for contact; single experiences get very important; *"events that speeded up the whole thing"* (male, 45) or *"another stone in the mosaic"* (male, 54)

**Scandals:** a trigger to leave and a confirmation of a prior decision

**Church tax:** stimulates reflections on why someone is still a member; religious belief?, use of church offers (cost-benefit); *"The church tax is paid for the preservation of the churches ... I do not use this ... I don't necessarily need to be within the church."* (female, 25)

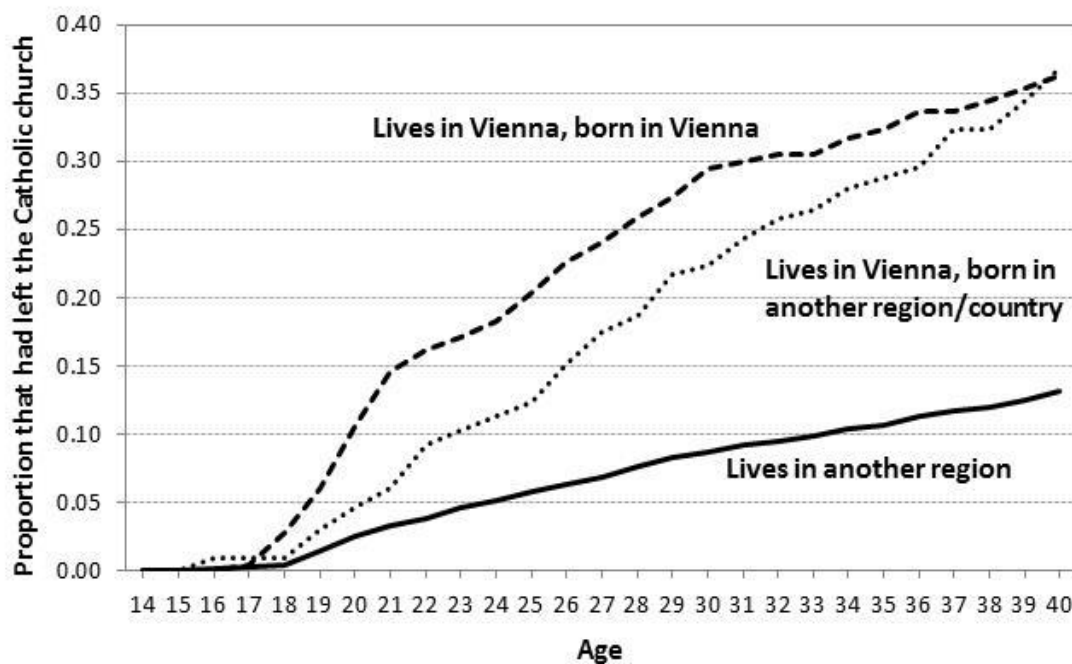
## (5) Family and relatives

Parents' or grandparents' influence led to a postponement of leaving: *"In deference to my family I did not leave and only a couple of years later ... when I registered my principal residence in Vienna, then I left immediately."* (male, 45)

Little discussion with parents about this decision; sometimes joint decision with partner



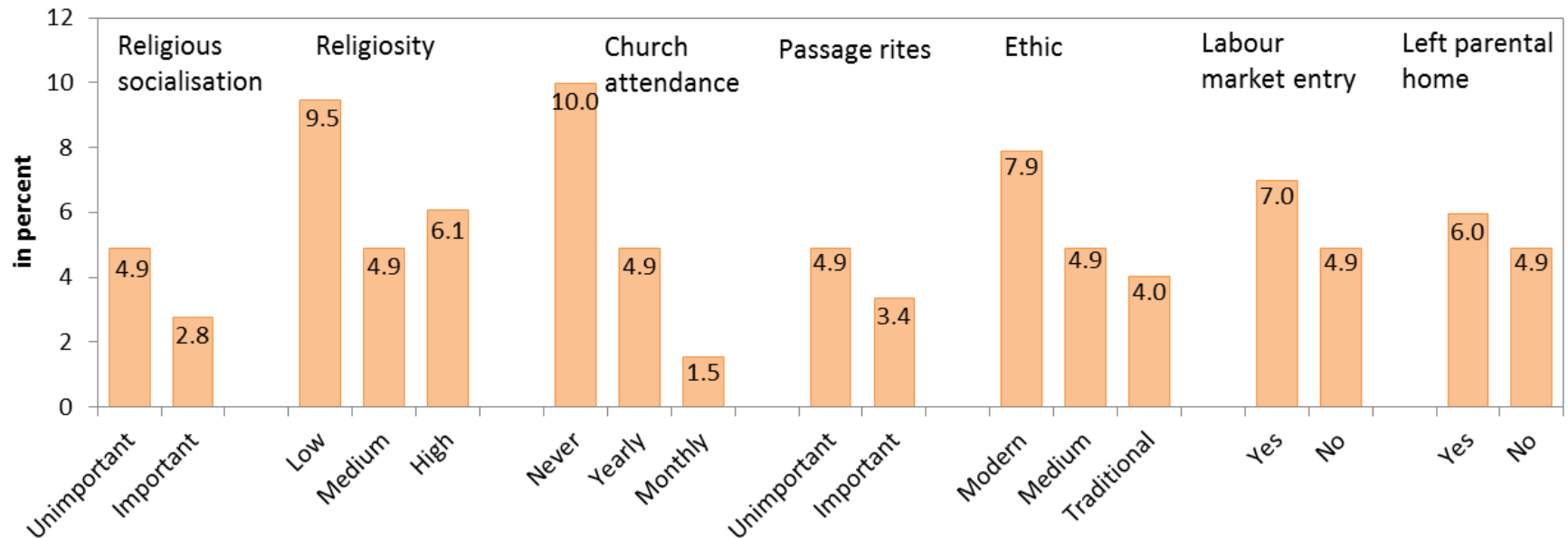
## (5.2) Quantitative results: determinants of leaving the church



Source: Austrian Generations and Gender Survey 2012/13 (own computations)

Note: Survival curve, based on retrospective information

# Predicted probabilities of leaving the church between 2008/09 and 2012/13



Source: Austrian Generations and Gender Surveys (own computations)

Note: Predicted probabilities from a logit model; controlled for sex, age, education, region and country of birth

## (6) Summary

- Leaving church needs to be understood as process over the life course, not as a single event
- Marginal members leave the Catholic church (not disappointed core members)
- Already medium religiosity, yearly church attendance and medium agreement with ethic lower the probability of leaving
- Low religiosity is the key reason to leave, other factors are mostly triggers → conversion to Protestantism unlikely

- Religious socialisation and importance of passage rites yield independent significant effects
- Risk of leaving the church remains high over adult life course

# Questions?

# Comments?

✉ [desiree.krivanek@oeaw.ac.at](mailto:desiree.krivanek@oeaw.ac.at)

✉ [caroline.berghammer@univie.ac.at](mailto:caroline.berghammer@univie.ac.at)