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

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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 $\rightarrow$ 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 $\rightarrow$ 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?

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