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ARTIKEL

Right-wing populism and religion in Germany: Conservative Christians and the Alternative for Germany (AfD)

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Abstract This essay provides an analysis of the nexus between conservative Christianity and the political party "Alternative for Germany," hereinafter called AfD. The AfD is widely acknowledged as a right-wing populist party, although not by insiders. Of particular interest here is how a conservative religious position has become aligned with right-wing political activism. For this purpose the overlap of conservative religious and right-wing populist themes is analyzed. Furthermore, the type of Christians who constitute the activists and members of the AfD is looked at. Also of interest is the sub-group "Christians in the AfD." Because the AfD combines an anti-immigration, nationalist, islamophobic, and cultural-conservative agenda, and caters to ethno-racist groups, both the party, and the sub-group in particular, are suited for an analysis of the intersections between Christianity and right-wing populism.

Keywords Right-wing Populism · Alternative for Germany (AfD) · Conservative Christianity · Christian Fundamentalism

Rechtspopulismus und Religion in Deutschland: Konservative Christen und die Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)

Zusammenfassung Dieser Aufsatz analysiert den Nexus zwischen konservativem Christentum und der politischen Partei Alternative für Deutschland, im Folgenden mit dem Akronym AfD bezeichnet. Die AfD gilt weithin als rechtspopulistische Partei, allerdings nicht bei Mitgliedern. Von besonderem Interesse ist in hier, wie eine konservative, religiöse Haltung sich mit einem rechtspopulistischen Diskurs verbinden konnte. Zum Zweck der Analyse wurden die Überlappungen zwischen den konservativ-religiösen und rechts-populistischen Themen analysiert. Außerdem

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wurden die politischen Aktivisten und Mitglieder mit Blick auf ihre christliche Konfession betrachtet. Von Bedeutung ist zudem die Gruppe „Christen in der AfD“ (ChrAfD). Beide, die Partei AfD und diese Gruppe sind besonders für eine Analyse der Schnittstelle zwischen Christentum und Rechtspopulismus geeignet, weil die AfD migrationsfeindliche, nationalistische, islamophobe und kulturell-konservative Inhalte kombiniert und völkisch orientierte Gruppen anspricht.

Schlüsselwörter Rechtspopulismus · Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) · Konservatives Christentum · Christlicher Fundamentalismus

1 Introduction

With the September, 2017, federal election in Germany, the rise of the right-wing populist AfD party, and specifically the role and connection between the AfD and Christianity, has become a timely subject. The party entered the Federal Parliament as the third-largest party and achieved 92 seats out of 709 (Bierbach 2017).[1] Apart from the AfD's popularity, there are several reasons to study its rise in a religious context. One is that the AfD and collective actors in their environment (e. g. Pegida, the Identitarian movement, and the European New Right)[2] label themselves as right-wing conservative forces, and as defenders of the Christian Occident. Pegida, the acronym for Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident, a right-wing protest movement, already carries this connotation in its name.[3] Moreover, right-wing newspapers and websites that grant the AfD politicians and its discourse considerable space, such as the Young Freedom (*Junge Freiheit*), understand themselves as conservative; and subjects on Christianity clearly predominate (Wagenseil 2012).[4] Additionally, there are multiple Christian media outlets that provide a platform for the AfD (Bednarz 2017, 2018; Strube 2015b).

Another reason to study the link between the AfD and conservative Christianity in Germany, is that everything indicates that the party, as a new right-wing actor in the political German landscape, caters to a conservative Christian constituency. This constituency formerly has been represented by other conservative parties, mainly

[1] At first, the AfD achieved 94 seats. However, shortly after the election, Frauke Petry and Mario Mieruch declared that they did not want to be part of the AfD group. They are now individual members of the German parliament (Holzapfel 2017, p. 24).

[2] A description of Pegida, the Identitarian movement, and the European Right follows later in the text.

[3] The reference to Christianity does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with practiced religiosity; that is, the distinction between self-labeling as defenders of the Christian occident and actual religious identity is important here. Or, as one of the anonymous reviewers poignantly said, “Can you imagine Lutz Bachmann as a regular church-goer?” Lutz Bachmann is regarded the founder of Pegida and is a multiply-sentenced criminal (possession of drugs, numerous burglaries, personal injuries, and sedition) (Niewendick 2014; Rögner 2016).

[4] The *Junge Freiheit* is a national weekly newspaper. Its self-depiction is that of a conservative medium. Political scientists classify the profile of the paper between conservativism and right-wing extremism and depict it as a “mouthpiece of the New Right” (Braun and Vogt 2007; Maaß 2014). Editor in chief Dieter Stein, underlines in an interview with a journalist from the newspaper *Die Welt*, that the *Junge Freiheit* is not the party newspaper of the AfD (Mahlberg (March 31) 2017).

those which already carry in their name the "C" for Christian: the CSU (Christian Social Union) and its sister party the CDU (Christian Democratic Union). A question, or rather a pair of hypotheses, arises: whether subjects such as abortion, family support, fear of Islam, gender identities, and persecution of Christians are placed on the agenda for the purpose of obtaining votes from conservative Christians; or whether there is (similarly to the Tea Party movement in the U.S.) a genuine alliance between right-wing political forces and conservative Christians, hence a political-religious project of faith (Marzouki 2016). Put differently, is this, or is it not, a "hijacking of religion" by a right-wing populist party, as an edited volume by Marzouki, on other European countries, proposes (Marzouki et al. 2016).

Furthermore, the AfD is a timely subject for understanding the contemporary nexus (and contradictions) between nationalism and conservative Christianity. Particularly difficult to understand (and apparently counterintuitive) is how parts of a conservative Christian electorate responded to the influx of refugees, when multiple themes, values, and commandments within the Christian tradition (family-centeredness, hope, and charity, to name a few) are clearly at odds with the party's anti-immigrant, xenophobic, and border-protectionist discourse. As the U.S. Catholic bishops have noted, "[T]heJudeo-Christian tradition is steeped in images of migration." Jesus' life story provides a good example. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus enters the world amid a drama involving documentation (Lk 2:1–5). In Matthew's account, Jesus and his family must flee a threat that endangers their lives, making them political refugees (Mt 2:13–17, a parallel to a foundational migration in biblical history, Exodus 1). In John's Gospel, many have trouble believing in Jesus precisely because of the place from which he emigrates (Jn 7:41–43, 52). Most importantly, the universal and anti-nationalist philosophical underpinnings of Christianity should be considered: that the central Christian argument, as introduced in the Book of Genesis, is that human beings are created in the likeness of God (Gen 1:26–27; 5:1–3; 9:6; 1 Cor 11:7; Jas 3:9) (Groodey 2009, p. 644; 649). The idea of this essay however, is not to juxtapose Biblical content with right-wing populism, but rather to understand how Christian religious positions have become aligned with right-wing political activism. This alignment can be understood in terms of an historical process of response to changes in Germany's society, politics, culture, and religion. To summarize this with another hypothesis: there is a possible link between the AfD appearing on the scene as a new right-wing populist party and a concurrent split within the conservative Christian religious milieu, into a radicalized Christian right and a more moderate faction.[5]

In studying the rise of the AfD in combination with conservative Christianity, this essay is venturing into new territory. To date, there is only one edited volume, in German, that deals with these questions as they relate to Germany—*Right-wing Extremism as a Challenge for Theology* (Strube 2015b). The edited volume *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion,* a major reference on the phenomenon of right-wing populism and religion, has no entry on Germany (Marzouki et al. 2016). Several other recent German publications address the subject but not as historical, sociological or political analysis—*The Preachers of Fear: How right-wing Chris-*

[5] Christian "Right" means here a liaison between ethno-racist (*völkisch*) and Christian cultural claims.

tians are undermining Society and Churches (Bednarz 2018) and the edited volume by Wolfgang Thielmann, *Alternative for Christians? The AfD and its ambivalent relationship to Religion* (Thielmann et al. 2017b). The first book is an insightful political debate written by an outspoken conservative, anti-abortionist Christian lawyer, and the second is an edited volume that combines the perspectives of activists from different spheres (churches, denominations, and individual pastors).

This leads to the structure of the article: first, the methodology—methods and terms used in this article are discussed and defined; second, there is an analysis of the history and rise of the AfD as a political party. In this section will be found biographical sketches of AfD-politicians whose Christian religious identities or connections to Christian churches seem important (although there are only a handful). The third section takes a closer look at the AfD membership and electorate, especially with regard to religious identities, gender, and geography (eastern and western Germany). The last section analyzes in broader detail the overlap of conservative religious and right-wing populist themes.[6] In sum, careful consideration has been placed throughout the article on the biographies of individuals—both politicians who are notable for their Christian identity and Christians who can be called sympathizers. Themes that appear on websites of both the AfD and conservative Christians (for instance, activists and members of the group "Christians in the AfD") will be examined.

2 Methodology and methods used

The underlying logic of this research departs from a social constructivist approach. It acts on the premise that the meanings of social action and institutions are constructed, interpreted, and constantly reconstructed by individuals. Hence, meaning is shaped by social interactions with others and always attached to a specific context; that is, a concrete time and space.[7] One outcome of this approach is the acknowledgment that social reality is created by human beings and that it potentially varies over time and place. Therefore, the perception of what is 'real' to an AfD politician raised in the German Democratic Republic may not be 'real' to a member of a different party raised in the Federal Republic of Germany.[8] The premise of the existence of multiple social realities and meanings connects well with this research because I deal here with diverse belief systems that belong to different individual and collective actors and social movements. Put differently, the acceptance of a fluidity of social meanings requires a key methodological necessity: religious and 'ethnic' or 'racial' categories are not previously defined but constructed and reconstructed according to the significance they have for social actors, thus rendering explorative empirical

[6] I have deviated, whenever it seemed appropriate, from this strict structure. Likewise, biographical sketches appear in the third section on discourse, and discursive elements will be found in the history section.

[7] This line of reasoning harkens back to Max Weber (1980) and his "interpretative sociology," to Pierre Bourdieu and his "theory of practice," (Bourdieu 1977), and to Frederik Barth and his concept of "ethnic groups and boundaries" (Barth 1969, 1996).

[8] This is a paraphrase from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's book, *The Social Construction of Reality*; only Berger and Luckmann are referring to a Tibetan monk and an American businessman. See Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 2–3).

results possible and avoiding a strict framing and predetermination of the research field. Another advantageous aspect of this kind of social constructivism is that it entails a historic dimension. Therefore, social change; which is itself important in understanding the emergence of new parties such as the AfD and other right-wing actors, can be incorporated.

The data collection reflects this constructivist approach. This is, first and foremost, a preliminary qualitative study; although, when available, quantitative data is used to describe the AfD (such as electoral results). Among the primary sources is the party's program from 2017 (AfD 2017), a 96-page document available in English. I have analyzed this document systematically, looking at references to religion in general and Christianity in particular, as well as to the following subjects: right-wing populism (in the form of anti-elitism and ethno-racism), Islam, migration, gender, family, and abortion. Among other primary sources are the websites of the AfD sub-group "Christians in the AfD" and the right-wing extremist Identitarian movement. AfD-affiliated newspapers, such as the *Junge Freiheit,*were also included in the analysis. Furthermore, Christian conservative networks, weekly magazines, and online publications, such as the Deutsche Evangelische Allianz (DEA), *kath.net, ideaSpektrum, idea.de*, and the Forum Deutscher Katholiken were included via preliminary research who directly scrutinized these (e.g. Bauer 2012; Bednarz 2017, 2018; Strube 2015b).

3 Essential terms

In this article, the political party AfD and links to conservative Christianity constitute the research field. To recap, the question at hand is how a conservative religious position could become aligned with right-wing political activism. This alignment is understood historically (as a historical process in response to changes in Germany's society, politics, culture, and religion), but also ideologically (as an overlap between conservative religious and right-wing political discourses). The terms right-wing populism, conservativism, Christian conservativism, as well as related terms such as the radical right, and right-wing extremism need to be defined because they serve as heuristic instruments to develop a research question that helps to systematically develop the research field. These definitions follow.

3.1 The radical right, right-wing populism, and right-wing extremism

Populism is understood in this article to be an ideology of, and for, the people. It is a view and a movement that calls for a mobilization against the political elite in the name of the people. "Populist discourse is strongly *antielitist*," noted sociologist Roberta Garner, an expert on social movements (Garner 1996, p. 184, emphasis in the text); an assessment that is certainly accurate when looking at the AfD party declaration.[9] In the words of the AfD: "[B]ehind the scenes a small and powerful

[9] Anti-elitism is an element that is repeatedly mentioned by literature on populism (see also Decker 2015, p. 64; Mudde 2015, and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017).

elite within the political parties is secretly in charge, and is responsible for the misguided development of past decades. It is this political class of career politicians whose foremost interest is to retain their own power base, status, and material well-being. It is a political cartel which operates the levers of government power, insofar as these have not been transferred to the EU" (AfD 2017, p. 7).

Populism is also more a theme that occasionally appears within diverse ideologies than it is a movement ideology in its own right (Garner 1996, p. 186); for example, populism does not involve an elaborated analysis of capitalism as a system (Garner 1996, p. 184). Therefore, the prefix 'right,' versus 'left,' indicates that, in the case of the AfD, emphasis is placed on cultural-nationalist and, at times, openly ethno-racist (*völkisch*) claims—that is, to protect German culture from foreign influence and specifically from Muslim migrants. Furthermore, there is a propagation of inequality by claiming for certain groups more rights than for others, or by denigrating other groups (especially Muslim immigrants and citizens). Last, and certainly not least, there is the call for a strong, authoritarian state and/or leader, which goes hand in hand with anti-liberal positions, and is contrary to basic democratic values such as equality (Decker and Lewandowsky 2017, p. 27; Schellenberg 2016; Zakaria, Krastev and Mudde qt. in Priester 2017, p. 9).

Michael Kohlstruck and others differentiate between anti-system and anti-establishment parties (Schellenberg 2016). For them right-wing extremist parties are anti-system parties, whereas populist parties, such as the AfD, are 'only' anti-establishment parties (Kohlstruck 2008, p. 224). "Anti-system" is understood here as a synonym for "anti-democratic"; that is, right-wing extremist movements, parties, and groups are identified as collectives that put themselves deliberately outside the democratic order, sometimes by the call for, or use of, violence. Taken together, this author locates the AfD as both a right-wing populist and right-wing extremist party. On the one hand, the party seems to acknowledge the democratic order by being part of it as a political party and by being anti-elitist; while on the other hand, it is anti-system (right-wing extremist) with its deliberate attacks on the political system and its maneuvers to destabilize democracy. Public marches, such as in Chemnitz in late August 2018, indicate that alliances exist with anti-constitutional and anti-democratic forces. In this case, the AfD politician Björn Höcke marched with Pegida, a right-wing extremist movement, and other groups which were observed by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitutional (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz 2016; Grunert 2018). Some researchers, such as Julia Ebner, do not distinguish between right-wing populism and right-wing extremism. Ebner calls the AfD and Pegida both and justifies this by arguing that right-wing populism paves the way for right-wing extremism (Wildermann 2018). In sum, it is important to note is that the AfD is not a coherent party in this respect.[10]

Finally, the term radical-right has to be defined for this debate. It is a general term which encompasses the whole spectrum from right-wing populism to right-wing extremism (Schellenberg 2016).

[10] Different strands of Christian positions also exist in the AfD, which is especially visible on the website of the group "Christians in the AfD.".

3.2 Similarities and differences between conservativism, conservative Christianity, right-wing populism, and right-wing extremism

Klaus Fritsche, in his entry on "Conservativism" in the Handbook for Political Theories and Ideologies, describes it as a "concept to secure social domination" (Fritsche 1998). This is in line with Andrew Haywood who identifies conservatives as those who seek to preserve a range of traditional social institutions such as monarchy, religion, parliamentary government, and property rights, with the aim of emphasizing social stability and continuity (Haywood 2012, p. 69). More important for this essay are the central tenets of conservativism: tradition, hierarchy, authority, property rights (ibid.), and community (Garner 1996, p. 110). More extreme and radical groups within conservativism, such as reactionaries, oppose modernism and advocate for a return to the status quo ante. This can be the previous political and/or religious state of society which they believe possessed characteristics (discipline, respect for authority, etc.) that are negatively absent from a contemporary society (McLean and McMillan 2009).

The term "conservative Christianity," as opposed to "Christian fundamentalism," was deliberately used in this article in order to fully cover the nexus between right-wing populism and Christianity. Put differently, the use of the term "Christian fundamentalism" would have meant a narrowing of the discussion about a nexus between right-wing populism and Christianity. For the purpose of this article, I define "Christian conservativism," as an attitude that, analogous to political conservativism, seeks a return to the status quo ante, but in a religious meaning. In the Catholic Church this has meant a return to the pre-Vatican II order in terms of rituals (e. g. the Latin mass); or, more generally among both Catholic and Protestant denominations, an anti-liberal, anti-modern attitude. Typical positions among conservative Christians are a defense of traditional gender roles; these include an emphasis on the importance of the traditional family, an anti-homosexual stance, a rejection of same-sex marriages, (including child adoption by same-sex-couples), and opposition to abortion.

The overlap between radical-right positions (which encompass right-wing populism and right-wing extremism) and conservativism (including Christian conservativism) clearly consists of belief in the central tenets of authority (an emphasis on law-and-order policies and the primacy of security) and community (contrasting to individualism). More generally speaking, the radical-right movement and conservativism share, in a socio-political sense, anti-liberal and anti-modern positions (e. g. the defense of the traditional family and traditional gender roles). A difference exists, however, in the absence within conservatism of belief in the fiction of a unified people or, put differently, in ethno-racist claims. Furthermore, the goal of securing continuity by preserving a range of traditional institutions, including the parliamentary system, means that conservatives are not automatically anti-elitist or

anti-democratic. And conversely, the preservation of traditional institutions, be they religious or political, is not a genuine characteristic of the radical right.[11]

4 History of the AfD

The sharp and sustained rise of right-wing populist parties in European democracies is a relatively new phenomenon (Decker 2015; Marzouki et al. 2016; Schellenberg 2016). The AfD is certainly a case in point. Founded officially in April 2013, and mainly as an outcome of the Euro-crisis and as a critique of the fiscal policy of the European parliament towards Greece, the party rose quickly and achieved great success. During the European Union election (May 2014) and all German federal-states elections from 2014 until May 2017, the party was able to earn parliamentary mandates (Statista 2017). This progress culminated in the German federal election of September 2017 when the party achieved 12.6% of the second vote (votes given to a specific party)[12] and became the third-largest party in the German parliament (Deutscher Bundestag 2017).[13]

During the party's foundational period, the EU-rescue policy formed the central concern of its activists. In this debate, and until his defeat as an AfD leader in July 2015, the Hamburg economics professor Bernd Lucke (an active member of the Protestant Reformed Church and a married father of five)[14] played a major role. In 2010, he initiated the Plenary of Economists (Plenum der Ökonomen), arguing with several others in this group against the Euro-rescue policies. Later, the decision of the Federal Parliament of the European Union to consolidate the Euro-rescue umbrella, and to establish the European stability measures as permanent, convinced Lucke and his fellow campaigners that the influence of economists on politics was too low. In 2012, this assessment paved the way for the founding of the Alliance-Will-of-the-Citizens (Bündnis Bürgerwille), a group that did not understand itself as a party but rather as a non-partisan movement. To turn things around in the future, the group suggested that political decisions concerning fundamental issues should be dependent on the direct consent of citizens. This proposal became paramount within the AfD, as they formed their initial remarks in the preamble to the 2016 party

[11] It is rather the invention of tradition that can be seen in ethno-racist and nationalist movements. See Stern (1963) for the 19th and early 20th century Germany; and Hobsbawn and Ranger for Great Britain (1996).

[12] The German Bundestag is elected in accordance with the principles of proportional representation in combination with a candidate-centered election. This is also called personalized proportional representation. Under this system, each voter has two votes. The first vote is for a specific candidate, and the second vote is for a party. First votes and second votes results can therefore vary. For the electoral system, see Bundeswahlleiter (2018).

[13] The center-right CDU/CSU parliamentary group (32.9%) and the center-left SPD party (20.5%) achieved first and second place respectively (Deutscher Bundestag 2017).

[14] For years he led Sunday school classes in his church (Ankenbrand (December 14) 2013). In 2004, he strongly opposed the economy-critical statement of faith which the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) had adopted (Wasserloos-Strunk 2009, p. 77).

declaration and the party program.[15] It has to be added that typical of other populist parties, the quest for a more direct form of democracy is tied to conspiracy-laden beliefs and a harsh critique of the political elite and its decision-making processes.

The next step towards the establishment of the AfD party was the founding of the organization Election-Alternative 2013 (Wahlalternative 2013). This organization did not participate in the state elections but cooperated with the party Free Voters (Freie Wähler) in some elections (for instance, in Lower Saxony). For the activists, the results were very disappointing—a reason that led to the decision to transform the existing organization into a political party (Oppelland 2017, p. 174).

Regarding the success of the party, it is important to note that the critique of the Euro-rescue policies was shared, not only by associations of medium-sized businesses and the middle class, but also by elements within the established political parties. This helped the subsequent founders of the AfD to establish a broad network and to get access to the financial resources that were necessary to establish a party. Furthermore, Lucke's background as an economics professor, active Protestant, and married family man was crucial for providing the party with legitimacy, eligibility, and an impression of competent authority. According to journalist Melanie Amann, Lucke was ideal for founding the party because of his absolute integrity and his enormous commitment. Perhaps most important for voters from the conservative Christian milieu, he had had no extramarital affairs, he didn't drink or smoke, he had no debt, didn't evade taxes, and didn't socialize with lobbyists (Amann 2017, p. 120).

4.1 Right-wing nationalist radicalization in the AfD and conservative Christianity

The year 2015 marked a clear change in the party's agenda away from an EU-critique to a fierce anti-immigration critique and an ethno-nationalist discourse. It is worthwhile analyzing the connection of anti-Islam elements to Christianity. Here the link between the AfD and the Pegida movement is crucial because it was precisely the question of how to deal with the Pegida movement that led to a severe conflict within the AfD and its right-wing radicalization. Pegida is a right wing, nationalist, ethno-racist, anti-Islamist protest movement which was founded in October 2014 in Dresden, in eastern Germany (Ipb 2015; Vorländer 2017). The refugee crisis in autumn of the same year equipped the party with a topic that fit exactly into the previous anti-Islam and pro-Christian discourse. The following paragraphs explore this connection against the backdrop of party history.

From early on, the AfD was confronted with the reproach of being a right-wing populist party. Such accusations were already denied by the founders of the Bündnis Bürgerwille, who distanced themselves from all right-wing extremist or radical polit-

[15] In the preamble on page five, the program states: "As free citizens we believe in direct democracy." On page eight the point is extended: "The AfD advocates the introduction of referenda in Germany based on the Swiss model. The German people should have the right to vote on laws made by Parliament. From the outset this would have a limiting and moderating effect on Parliament and over time would stem the flood of nonsensical legislation" (AfD 2017, p. 5).

ical currents. Nevertheless, the subsequent AfD slogan "Mut zur Wahrheit" (Courage for Truth) reinforced to the populist mindset that the established parties were guilty of lying to the electorate. Negative, depreciative associations were frequently made in relation to immigration; e. g. on election posters in which immigrants were accused of abusing the German welfare system. They signaled that voters with an anti-immigrant mindset were the targeted audience. These outlooks were shared as well by voters for the established parties; and, it would seem, within all Christian churches and denominations.

Angelika Strube (2015a) and Liane Bednarz (2018) carefully scrutinized Christian websites. Both found numerous references to AfD, Pegida, the Identitarian movement and other ethno-racist platforms.[16] Frequent subjects were islamophobia, persecution of Christians, family, abortion, and the so-called "gender-delusion" (Gender-Wahn). Angelika Strube, a theologian, speaks of "Christian Media as a bridge to the Right" (p. 21). Christian websites, networks, and magazines which post links and texts of Pegida, the Identitarian movement, AfD members and politicians, or which invite speakers from these groups, include *kath.net, ideaSpektrum, idea.de, Pforzheimer Kreis* (Bednarz 2018, p. 196), *Die neue Ordnung* (a magazine edited by the social ethicist and Dominican priest Wolfgang Ockenfels (Bednarz 2018, p. 19)), the Deutsche Evangelische Allianz (DEA) (Strube 2015b, 13), *charismatismus.wordpress.com, kreidfeuer.wordpress.com, zeltmacher.eu*, and the Forum Deutscher Katholiken (Bednarz 2018, p. 20; Strube 2015a, 21–24).

Religion, however, did not feature prominently in the founding stages of the AfD. In fact, even in May 2016, Alexander Gaulandt, co-leader of the AfD parliamentary group, stated to the newspaper Christians and the World (*Christ und Welt*): "We are not a Christian party. We are a German party that tries to safeguard the German interests" (qt. in Bednarz 2018, p. 233).[17] Nevertheless, religion was an element that was never absent. Either it was used as a positive identity marker that was under threat, namely the "Christian tradition," or as a negative reference to the Muslim-Other, a group which was and is portrayed as embodying this threat. In the words of the AfD general declaration, "[I]t is one of the primary political goals of the AfD to preserve the great cultural heritage for future generations, and to develop and retain its unique characteristics in an age of globalisation and digitalisation" (AfD 2017, p. 46). The Christian tradition is quoted as a first source of this "predominant culture" (AfD 2017, p. 46), a reference that certainly cannot be called purely tactical among active Christians in the party and the group "Christians in the AfD." Multiculturalism is instead, according to the AfD, "blind to history and puts on a par imported cultural trends with the indigenous culture, thereby degrading the value system of the latter.

[16] For instance, Tommy Robinson (alias Stephen Yaxley-Lennon) of the right-wing extremist English Defence League, Austrian FPÖ, Pro-NRW, Pro-Deutschland, the violent European hooligan scene, and sezession.de, the latter linked to the Identitarian movement and Götz Kubitschek (Strube 2015a, 21–22).

[17] Naturally, this is seen differently by some (devote) Christians in the AfD; for instance by Michael Frisch who sees the AfD as a party that best represents Christian positions, compared to all other parties (Thielmann 2017a). Frisch is Catholic, was for many years a CDU-member, and since 2014 he leads the AfD in his home-town of Trier. Moreover, he is an AfD-politician and member of the Rhineland-palatinate federal state parliament and authored a church-political manifesto (Thielmann 2017a).

The AfD views this as a serious threat to social peace and the survival of the nation state as a cultural unit" (AfD 2017, p. 46).

In early 2015, the aforementioned conflict around Pegida erupted. Whereas Lucke and his followers in the party distanced themselves from this movement and called it xenophobic, islamophobic, and not "civil," the chairmen of the eastern German state associations, especially the regional chairman of the AfD state association of Thuringia, Björn Höcke, had the opinion that the political unrest of the Pegida followers should be addressed and taken seriously (Oppelland 2017, p. 175).

In March, 2015, Björn Höcke published the so-called Erfurt resolution, spelling out his criticism of Lucke and Lucke's party line: the party "kept away from civil protest movements although thousands of members of the AfD were co-protesters and participating in these awakenings [...] Without need it adapted itself to the established political business" (qt. in Oppelland 2017, p. 175). In return, Lucke and other founders of the AfD blamed un-named leaders of the AfD in their wake-up call of 2015 (Weckruf 2015), saying that these leaders would try to soften the political fringes and to integrate more radical forces that were generally critical of the political system; that is, in fundamental opposition to it and nationalistic (Oppelland 2017, p. 175). Despite the intra-party conflict, the AfD was able to get enough votes in February and May of 2015 to move into the Hamburg and Bremen parliaments. Frauke Petry, who was formerly one of the three party spokespersons from 2013 to 2015 and afterwards AfD-chair, did not sign any of these resolutions (Amann 2017, p. 150).

According to Melanie Amann, the Erfurt resolution was based on an idea of Götz Kubitschek, a close friend of Björn Höcke (Amann 2017, pp. 144–148). Kubitschek is also an outspoken Catholic, frequent speaker at Pegida demonstrations, founder of the right-wing intellectual think-tank Institut für Staatspolitik (Institute for State Politics),[18] co-founder of the Identitarian movement in Germany, and on an international level a member of the right-wing network Nouvelle Droite, or New Right. In January, 2015, he and his wife Ellen Kositza applied for an AfD-membership which was rejected under the party leadership of Bernd Lucke (Amann 2017, p. 146; Bender and Bingener 2016). What is relevant here is how Kubitschek has incorporated Christianity in his ethno-nationalist, racist discourse. In his words: "If you want to hear this now from a believer in Christ: The German people is a design of God. It is a special way to go through history in all its heights and lows" (3Sat Kulturzeit 2016). Evidently, we are dealing here with a particularist-nationalist interpretation of Christianity which is also highlighted by the AfD; namely a German Christianity

[18] Kubitschek founded the institute together with Karlheinz Weißmann, a theologian, historian, author, publicist, and teacher (of history and religion). Weißmann is considered the intellectual mastermind of the New Right in Germany. For the link between conservative Christianity and the AfD, it seems important that he is one of the frequent authors of the *Junge Freiheit*, a weekly newspaper in which subjects on Christianity are strongly represented, and in which the majority of the authors take positions as "Christian" (Uhrig qt. in Wagenseil 2012). Christian Uhrig analyzed the Christian and Islam images in the paper. According to him, the positive and negative images of Christianity and Islam that the paper creates have to be taken together, in that a polarization is created which ultimately serves as an upgrading of a positive Christian identity through the devaluation of the Muslim "Other."

and not the universal idea of Christianity with its values of equality and dignity for all human beings.

Interesting, but also alarming is, how nationalist, racist elements of the New Right emerge among active Christians in Germany. As mentioned, Kubitschek forms part of the network New Right, a white-nationalist, activist movement originating in France with ties to older fascist networks (Roy 2016). Founder Alain de Benoist writes more recently in his autobiography that "one cannot propagate racial-mixing and racial-diversity, because the immediate result of the first is the degeneration of the latter" (Benoist qt. in Bednarz 2017, p. 21). He also stated that "well-meant political policies of cultural assimilation lead to genocide" (Benoist qt. by Bednarz 2017, p. 22). Maximilian Krah, a German lawyer from Dresden and also an outspoken Catholic took up this thread in 2015. He twittered with reference to the refugee crisis that "with Kant the ethno-suicide of Merkel is not justified. What is propagated here is counter-ethics" (Bednarz 2017, p. 18, 22–23). Krah was for 25 years a member of the CDU, and in 2016, he entered the AfD in a media-effective way. Furthermore, Krah was the defense lawyer of the controversial British-Catholic traditionalist bishop Richard Nelson Williamson. Williamson was in 2012 charged and convicted of Holocaust-denial by a German court; and he was a member of the Catholic Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX), which expelled the bishop after the verdict.[19]

Götz Kubitschek, the Austrian Martin Lichtmesz (sympathizer of the Identitarian movement), and the publicist Alexander Kissler, all stress their Catholic identity, and all criticized the policies of the German government for aiming to create a "population exchange" (Bednarz 2017, pp. 22–23). In this vein, the AfD politician Hans-Thomas Tillschneider characterizes various peoples as the "thoughts of God; nobody has the right to disfigure them beyond recognition. With the unrestrained mass immigration human's rise up against creation" (qt. in Lindemann 2018, p. 7 and Bednarz 2018, p. 40). There are also pastors such as Thomas Wawerka who has the vision of a "small church within the scope of a traditional, culturally assertive, homeland loving (heimatverbundenen) Christianity," which is in principle similar to the ideas of the Identitarian movement. Wawerka in fact, held several prayer sessions at Götz Kubitschek's Institute for State Politics and at the headquarters of his press Antaios in Schnellroda, a small village in Saxony-Anhalt (Kositza 2016).

Returning to the most recent AfD history, the convention in mid-2015 marked another caesura in the party's trajectory, leading to a withdrawal by Bernd Lucke; and which became a pattern that repeated itself after the federal election of September, 2017 when Frauke Petry withdrew. Born in 1975, in Dresden, East Germany, Petry is a former businesswoman with a Ph. D. in chemistry and four children from her first marriage to a Lutheran pastor (Meaney 2016). She met her first husband while still in her teens and making extra money playing the organ in church on Sunday

[19] Williamson opposes the changes in the Catholic Church brought about by the Second Vatican Council. The reason for his expulsion was however not his opposition to the Second Vatican council, the raison d'être of the Society of Saint Pius X, but his denial of the Holocaust. Williamson had already denied the Holocaust in 1989, when he called it an "invention by the Jews." Important in this respect is that Pope John Paul II had already excommunicated the anti-Semitic Bishop, a decision the German Pope Benedict XVI revoked in 2009 (Wensierski 2009).

(ibid.). Later, while she managed her company PURinvent GmbH, she pursued a professional training as a choir-leader and organist (Kowitz 2014). From 2008 to 2014, she was also a member of the Leipziger Vocalensemble, a prestigious choir that belongs to the famous Leipzig St. Thomas Church. In 2012, when 37, she received the Order of the Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany (Lang 2012). In short, similar to Bernd Lucke, she provided the AfD, which conceives of itself as a conservative party, with legitimacy and competent authority by means of a business past, her marriage to a Lutheran pastor, and her four children; or at least she did so until the party convention in Essen, in July 2015. After the convention, she made public her extra-marital affair with Marcus Pretzell (Amann 2017, p. 197), who at that point was an AfD party leader from North Rhine-Westphalia. They married in December, 2016 (Hähnig 2015), and in May, 2017, she gave birth to another child, the father being Marcus Pretzell.

Behind the clash at the party convention in Essen in July, 2015, were disputes around personal, territorial (east-west), and party-profile (ethno-nationalism) issues. Due to the success of the eastern German state associations, the leaders of the AfD there (among them Björn Höcke and Frauke Petry) were increasingly less willing to accept Lucke's lead position, as he was someone from western Germany[20] and clearly the dominant face of the party up to mid-2015. To recapitulate: Frauke Petry, the regional chairwoman of Saxony, was elected in April, 2013, as one of the party's spokespersons, along with Bernd Lucke and Konrad Adam.[21] At the party convention in Essen in early July, 2015, Lucke and Petry ran for the office of party spokesperson. Yet even before the vote, it was clear that Lucke lacked a majority within the party and consequently lost the vote. Petry won the election with around sixty percent of the votes. Lucke left the party within days after the convention.[22]

Martin Kroh from the Institute of German Economy and Karolina Fetz from the Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration Studies (Kroh and Fetz 2016) identify the party split in 2015 as the turning point in the party's profile. Whereas, before, the agenda had been more national-conservative, with an increase in ethno-racist commentaries and a shift in leadership, it became a more right-wing, populist party—similar to the Front National in France, the Freiheitliche Party in Austria (FPÖ), the Dutch Partiij voor de Vrijheid, and the British UK Independence

[20] Björn Höcke was socialized in West Germany, and Frauke Petry moved from the GDR to West Germany in 1989, shortly before the reunification, when she was fourteen years old (Amann 2017). Important is here that they represented the AfD in the eastern German states.

[21] Konrad Adam, married and with three children, was born in western Germany in 1942. Apart from being an AfD politician, he is a journalist and author. He worked for the prestigious newspapers *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Die Welt*. From 2013 to 2015, he was one of the federal spokespersons of the AfD. In April, 2017, he left the Protestant German Church. He justified his decision by claiming a one-sided and unreliable attitude of the leadership of the churches in refugee matters (ideaSpectrum 2017).

[22] Lucke later founded the party Alliance for Progress and Awakening (ALFA, Allianz für Fortschritt und Aufbruch), which later changed its name to Liberal-Conservative Reformers (LRK, Liberal-Konservative Reformer). Lucke was the federal chairman of that party until June 2016. In the state elections of that year the party was not very successful and, therefore, not a serious threat to the success of the AfD.

Party (UKIP). Also the constituency altered dramatically in a right-wing nationalist direction, as the next section on the AfD membership shows.[23]

In January, 2017, the dispute between the right-wing ethno-nationalist and the more "pragmatic" strain in the leadership around Frauke Petry, which wanted to keep the party in a position to join future coalitions with other parties, reached a new peak with a speech by Björn Höcke, when he addressed the Young Alternative (Junge Alternative), the party's youth organization. Höcke spoke negatively about the Holocaust memorial monument in Berlin, and requested a turn of 180 degrees in Germany's commemorative policies. According to Thomas Oppelland, these remarks found a negative response within the party (2017, p. 176). Frauke Petry took it as an opportunity to start a party-exclusion proceeding directed at her right-wing opponent, an attempt that Bernd Lucke had already started two years earlier (Decker 2018). Although a two-thirds majority within the federal board supported this measure, it became clear that neither Alexander Gauland, who became increasingly Petry's opponent within the party, nor Jörg Meuthen, approved of it. It is likely that the suspension measure of the federal party was proposed for tactical reasons, in order to cater to more moderate voters; whereas Höcke was trying to garner media attention for the AfD with his provocative commentaries. In May, 2018, the Thuringian party court of arbitration dismissed a proposal of the federal board as ungrounded (FAZ 2018; Decker 2018).

After the federal election of September, 2017, the party moved even more in a right-wing populist and nationalist direction. Only hours after the AfD became the third-largest party in the newly-elected parliament, Frauke Petry quit the party caucus. At a press conference on Monday morning, September 25, she announced that she wanted to serve as an independent member of the parliament. Petry said her decision was based on her belief that the anarchic party politics of the AfD in previous months precluded it from exercising "constructive opposition." Obviously, she took her party colleagues by surprise. Her co-leader, Jörg Meuthen, accused Petry of "dropping a bomb," adding, "That was not discussed with us in advance. We knew nothing about it." Alice Weidel, together with Alexander Gauland, one of the party's most successful election candidates, said Petry's walkout was "hard to beat in terms of irresponsibility" and urged her to leave the party altogether "to prevent further harm" (Connolly 2017). Shortly afterwards, Petry indeed left the party, together with her husband, Marcus Pretzell.

[23] Already before the party convention in Essen, a flurry of membership resignations started. The argument of those who left was mainly that a right-wing push had occurred in the party, tied to the above positions on how to deal with Pegida, but also ethno-racist, islamophobic, anti-immigration commentaries and attitudes by leaders. The new party board was denying these accusations with the argument that the programme of the party had not changed. Along with Bernd Lucke, almost twenty percent of members left the party (Oppelland 2017, p. 176).

5 The AfD-electorate, Christian AfD voters, and conservative Christians

Changes within the profile of the CDU explain to a large extent why conservative Christians became AfD voters. Anette Schultner, former co-founder and chairwoman of the group "Christians in the AfD" (ChrAfD), said in an interview in May, 2017, on a podium at the German Protestant Church Day, "I was for over two decades active in the CDU/CSU. For me it was important that conservativism has a political contact, something like a party. We have a conservative representation gap" (Thielmann 2017b, p. 176). She also said, "[T]here is a whole range of issues that are interesting and important for conservative Christians that you cannot find in other parties" (Thielmann 2017b, p. 172). So the question arises, what are these topics and who is exactly the constituency that feels represented by them?

A major topic that most likely is responsible for a higher voter-turnout among conservative Christians during the federal election in 2017, and related to the above-mentioned representation gap, is the legalization of same-sex marriages in a snap vote in June, 2017; shortly before the summer break and after a surprise shift by Chancellor Angela Merkel on the issue. The bill passed by 393 to 226, with four abstentions. Merkel herself voted against the bill, although her comments in a talk show, organized by the German women's magazine *Brigitte,* helped bring it about. More than seventy members of Merkel's conservative bloc, however, must have voted in favor of the bill for it to pass, an outcome not well-received by conservative Christian voters. Hardy Schumny remarked on the ChrAfD website, "[T]hose who had hoped the 'Christian'-Democrats would turn, at least in their majority—against this crazy left-green project regards itself (how many times now) deceived [...] Not the defense of so-called interests of gays and lesbians is of concern here but an attack at the Christian marriage, the union of man and woman which is per se life-long and indissoluble" (Schumny 2017).

Polls confirm that the AfD has been able to gain many voters from among people who previously voted for other parties, first and foremost the CDU and the FDP (Free Liberals). In 2016, during the elections for the eastern state parliaments, the AfD also pulled many votes from The Left (Die Linke). In a survey from 2016, taken after the election in Saxony-Anhalt, 64% of the AfD-voters agreed to the statement that they had voted for the party due to disappointment with other parties (Oppelland 2017, p. 178). The federal election in September, 2017, saw the center-right CDU/CSU win 32.9% of the vote, a drop of more than 8%, while the SPD achieved just 20.5% of the vote; both scored their worst electoral results in the postwar era. In numbers, and according to calculations performed after polls closed on election day, 1.47 million non-voters cast their first-ever ballot for the AfD, a statistic which also helps explain the increase in Election Day turnout, from 72.4% in 2013 to 76.2%. This is followed by one million people who had traditionally voted for the CDU or its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), who decided to support the right-wing populists. The center-left Social Democrats lost 500,000 voters to the AfD while the far-left The Left party saw 400,000 defections (Blickle et al. 2017).

Undoubtedly, it was Angela Merkel's political move to not close the borders for refugees in 2015 that led to so many voters supporting the AfD in the federal election of autumn 2017. The polls show, for example, that 89% of AfD voters thought that Merkel's immigration policies ignored the "concern of the people" (i.e. German citizens), 85% wanted stronger national borders, and 82% thought that twelve years of Merkel was enough. In other words, the AfD has profited from the fact that immigration, or anti-immigration sentiments, was the number-one issue in the most recent federal election (Mudde 2017). Important to note in this respect is that since the refugee crisis, German conservatives are divided under the chancellorship of Angela Merkel; not just a few CDU members opposed the refugee policies of the CDU in autumn, 2015 (Decker 2018).

This is underlined by the fact that the AfD reached spectacular results particularly after summer, 2015, and particularly in the eastern federal-states. In March, 2016, the AfD gained in Saxony-Anhalt (eastern Germany) more than 24% of the votes and became the second largest state caucus, ahead of The Left and the Social-Democratic Party (SPD). Furthermore, the result of 15.1% for the AfD in Baden-Württemberg (southwestern Germany) in the same year (Statistisches Landesamt Baden-Württemberg 2016), but also the results of the federal election in 2017 (Deutscher Bundestag 2017), show that the AfD is not only an eastern German phenomenon, but one involving the entire republic. This raises the question of what type of Christians give support to the AfD.

According to the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e. V., a polling research institute that does a representative survey on religious affiliation among voters on election days ($n = 41{,}334$), the AfD is predominantly supported by non-religious voters—most likely a result of the extraordinary success of the party in eastern Germany. 17% of the non-denominational voters declared to have voted for the AfD. 11% of the Protestant voters said they voted for the AfD, and 9% of the Catholic voters declared to have cast their ballot for the AfD. In comparison, 44% of the Catholic voters, and 33% of the Protestant voters voted for the Christian Democrats (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen 2018).

The profile of the AfD has clearly changed within the last three years, not in terms of gender though. The AfD is predominantly a men's only party; only about 15% of the members are women, the lowest proportion of women in parties that are in the German Federal Parliament (Kroh and Fetz 2016, p. 716). In terms of age and professional types, there was previously a slight over-representation of younger male voters and workers. Now, compared to 2014, voters are much younger, and the number of young male voters supporting the AfD has quintupled. Whereas in 2014, only two percent of males under the age of 30 stated they leaned towards a long-term AfD-party affiliation, in 2016 it was ten percent. The numbers for the over-sixty-year-old is one percent in 2014 and three percent in 2016 (Kroh and Fetz 2016, p. 15). Also important to note is that of the 92 AfD delegates in the federal parliament only ten are women (Holzapfel 2018, p. 318).

Esther Lehnert from the Alice Salomon University in Berlin, believes that the AfD uses women as a "soft focus" to signal to the outside a peaceful and middle-class image. She argues that this way right-wing extremist, racist and other anti-democratic positions are softened (Lehnert qt. in Die Welt 2018). A Christian image

would certainly serve the same purpose.[24] Undoubtedly, the party defends traditional and conservative positions on women's issues,[25] a defense the party shares with conservative Christians. And the party is able to present itself as a power directed toward the protection of women who feel discriminated against or harassed by male migrants from predominantly Muslim countries, in which women have fewer rights than in Germany. Incidents such as the Cologne 2015/2016 New Year's Eve alleged mass sexual assaults, when women were surrounded and assaulted by groups or men on the street, mostly of Maghrebian background, played into the hands of the AfD (Decker 2018). The answer to why this position does not cause more women to vote in large numbers for the AfD might be that the party essentially caters more to male voters, especially those men who perceive themselves as losers to cultural modernity; that is, those who fear losing their male privileges (Küpper qt. in Die Welt 2018).[26]

6 Conservative thought, the AfD, and a new Christian right

"In Christ alone my hope is found, He is my light, my strength, my song," people sang in the Potsdam Nikolaikirche. It was October 8, 2014, shortly before the inaugural meeting of the Brandenburg State Parliament. As usual, the two denominations, Catholic and Protestant, held an ecumenical service, and many came. Alexander Gauland, a former CDU member (1973–2013) and leader of the Hesse State Chancellery (1987–1991), who was elected as an AfD representative, was in charge of the opening remarks, being the oldest member of the new parliament. He was then 73 years old. Gauland referred in his speech to Edmund Burke, the Irish-British 18th-century state-philosopher, writer, and politician: A good parliamentarian can only be one who forms his own point-of-view, his unprejudiced opinion, his fully-developed judgment, and his illuminated consciousness (Lassiwe 2017, p. 29–30). Gauland has intensely studied Burke and published about him. Raymond Williams described Burke as "the first modern Conservative" and others as "the father of con-

[24] Liane Bednarz voiced this opinion in an event at the Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBS), where she presented her book *Preachers of Fear* (HBS Berlin (June 20) 2018). What is even more indicative is that Bednarz quotes in her book an email exchange between political scientist Claus Leggewie and Götz Kubitschek (Bednarz 2018, pp. 187–188). The latter had published the exchange on the blog sezession.de without the consent of the first. Kubitschek leaves no doubt that a Christian-Pegida alliance would give the New Right a much greater spiritual force, legitimacy, and a stronger cultural identity (Bednarz 2018, p. 188).

[25] Two examples from the party declaration: "The economy is calling for women as part of the workforce. There is a misconceived view of feminism, which favors women with a career above mothers and housewives. The latter often experience less recognition and are financially disadvantaged" (AfD 2017, p. 40). "There should once again be an incentive to marry, raise children, and spend time with them. The AfD will initiate a public discussion about strengthening the role of parents, and reduce the propagated stigmatisation of traditional gender roles" (AfD 2017, p. 40).

[26] Judith Götz, a political scientist and expert on the Identitarian movement, also notes that this movement is characterized by a strong anti-feminist discourse and three core enemy images: political liberalism, multiculturalism, and gender-egalitarianism (Götz 2017). To recapitulate, strong ties exist particularly between Björn Höcke, who represents the ethno-nationalist wing of the AfD and the Identitarians, particularly Götz Kubitschek. Höcke himself also encourages his male supporters with slogans such as, "We have to rediscover our manhood" (qt. in Die Welt 2018).

servativism" (Williams 1968, p. 23). A closer look shows that the overlap between the core ideas of Edmund Burke and the AfD is striking and it provides the key for understanding the common ground between the AfD and conservative Christians in the party.

Burke addressed the process of industrialization and the French Revolution, of which he was a staunch critic. Similar to today, his was a time of major upheaval and a tearing apart of the social order. Burke and his fellow conservatives argued, as does the AfD, that only a return to the status quo ante could fix the state of affairs. Furthermore, both have tried to reconstruct the legitimacy of the previous order; the early conservatives by pointing to pre-revolutionary times and the AfD to the EU between 1957 and 1993; they advocate the return to a German national currency and, most importantly, the conservation of what they consider a German culture under threat. In short, the AfD is troubled by what seems to them a society that has turned its back on tradition, custom, and religion.

Many sociologists have described and analyzed the phenomenon that occurs when changes in the social order provoke diffuse fears, up to the point of violent reactions.[27] Indeed it was change per se that was, and is, seen as problematic by former conservatives as well as the AfD. While in former times, industrialization and the French Revolution triggered these reactions which were the visible outcome of change, these days the AfD points to globalization, digitalization (AfD 2017, p. 46), and migration (AfD 2017, pp. 57–58). In the context of Germany, it is important to point out the structural changes that took place with regard to the reunification of Germany. They affected in an unprecedented way the people that lived in the German Democratic Republic and the east of today's Germany. In only a few years, the population in the east had to adjust to a complete change in the social order, the rule of law, and the political and economic system.[28] It is in eastern Germany that the AfD is particularly successful, according to a study from 2016 (although it wasn't so at the party's beginnings) (Kroh and Fetz 2016). In fact, the more right-wing the party has become, the more support it has gained among voters in the former East Germany—particularly among the working poor and those with a low educational level (Kroh and Fetz 2016, p. 715). The federal election of September, 2017, also casts no doubt that the AfD has its strongholds in the former communist east of the country (Blickle et al. 2017). While it scored on average 11% in western Germany, it received 21.5% in eastern Germany, almost twice as much. In short, it is precisely those people that are the most affected by socio-economic and political changes that are supporting the AfD. Having said that, it is also true that there are few Christians left in the former German Democratic Republic, an aspect that indicates that it is not Christianity alone which explains the high approval rate in eastern Germany. Rather

[27] Emile Durkheim's theory on anomie and crisis, and its enlargement by Robert K. Merton, are a fitting example. Durkheim understands anomie as the result of a disintegration of society through the erosion of formerly accepted norms and values. In the realm of crisis and rapid social change, altered social conditions are evidently a fertile ground for the development of new ideas, concepts, and beliefs.

[28] In this regard it is also necessary to point to the conditions under which migrants lived in the GDR. So-called contract workers were kept separate from the population. Housing, shopping and all spheres of life, except work, were separated. For further details, see Marianne Krüger-Potratz (1991); and Ann-Judith Rabenschlag (2016).

it proves that the AfD is able to cater to people with vastly different backgrounds and even those growing up in different state-systems.

Sociologically it comes as no surprise that a more plural society provokes reactions from those who see their ideal vision of society under threat. Perhaps this is no more apparent than when one considers the variety of gender roles in modern societies. Among those who most fiercely defend traditional gender roles are Christian fundamentalists. Indeed, an analysis of the agenda of the group "Christians in the AfD" shows that there is a great overlap with Christian fundamentalism. A sample of the AfD topics and demands that are mentioned in their declaration shows this: the defense of Christian culture, the traditional family, and marriage; the rejection of abortions and the promotion of large families; the defense of traditional gender roles; the opposition to assisted suicide; the support for Christianity and the traditional make-up of the religious landscape in Germany (Islam is not seen as a part of German culture but as a threat to German society); the selective skepticism towards some technology (e. g. a negative view of pre-implantation diagnostics); the promotion of religious instruction in schools; and the make-up of political boundaries (rejection of Turkey being in the EU) (AfD 2017; ChrAfD 2018).

The above-mentioned topics align precisely with what Roberta Garner describes as the agenda of politicized Christian fundamentalists in the U.S. According to her, this U.S. religious current holds the following views: "first, a conservative stand on social issues such as abortion, gay rights, and family structure; second, a call to narrow the gap between state and church in the United States, especially on issues like prayer in schools and public funding for religious education; third, strong opposition to communist and socialist movements or ideas, in the United States and elsewhere; and fourth, support for free enterprise and opposition to positive liberalism" (Garner 1996, p. 213).[29] Likewise, the AfD guiding principles advocate a competitive free market: "Free market competition produces the best economic results. The unsubsidized supply of goods and services, which is most beneficial to buyers and sellers alike, is always set to win the day. Therefore, the AfD contends that the stronger the competition, and the lower the ratio of government expenditures to gross national product (state spending ratio), the better it is for everyone" (AfD 2017, p. 66). According to David Bebnowski, the AfD does indeed combine a cultural Christian-conservativism with economic neoliberal positions (Bebnowski 2015, p. 9).

Importantly, Stephan Holthaus, whose dissertation compared German and U.S.-American Protestant fundamentalism, finds the same content in both countries: inerrancy of the Bible, biblical literalism, Biblical inspiration, opposition to the teaching of evolutionism (Darwinism) in schools, and similar institutional enemies (including, in Germany, a state church that embraces a critical reading of the Bible, liberalism, and modernity) (Holthaus 2003).[30]

[29] Positive liberalism means here a position of being against a positive or proactive role of the state in guiding the economy (Garner 1996, p. 137).

[30] The profound study by Gisa Bauer (2012), *Evangelikale Bewegung und evangelische Kirche in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Geschichte eines Grundsatzkonflikts (1945 bis 1989)* comes to the same results. More importantly, Bauer stresses that the German evangelical movement was not homogeneous in terms of its support-groups but is was homogeneous in terms of its content (Bauer 2012, p. 662).

Historically Christian fundamentalism in the U.S. was a reaction to the social gospel of outreach and social change at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was also a reaction to the encroachment of science, specifically the Darwinian model of evolution; which is incompatible with a literal reading of Genesis and threatens the belief that the Bible is not merely inspired by God, or inerrant in a spiritual sense, but that it is literally correct. Christian fundamentalism arose in the U.S. and in Germany in opposition to the interpretation of the Bible as a historical document, written and translated at different times and under varying conditions; as historical research became an area of religious scholarship that had grown during the nineteenth century. Thus, one element of Christian fundamentalism is an insistence on a literal reading of the Bible (Bauer 2012; Garner 1996; Geldbach 2001; Holthaus 2003). Interestingly, when looking at the activists of "Christians in the AfD," this is precisely their area of activism. Klaus Sydow, for instance, describes himself as being active in the evangelical church community "Freier Bruderkreis," organizing in his free time "evangelizing book-tables and information booths on infanticide in the mother's womb, and evolution theory versus creationism" (Sydow 2017).

This brings us to one of the most well-known activists within the AfD, Beatrix von Storch (born as Beatrix, "Duchess" of Oldenburg). Although she is not listed as a member of the federal board of the group "Christians in the AfD," her activism in organizing several marches against school curricula which push for a broader and more liberal sex education is certainly comparable with the above-mentioned agenda of the religious right (Stange 2015). In Germany, the debate over sexual pluralism and school curricula erupted in November, 2013, around a working paper of the Green-Red state government of Baden-Württemberg concerning the educational plan for 2015. The paper addressed the acceptance of sexual plurality as a leading principle in the plan, meaning that the students should get to know different forms of conviviality that are not heterosexual (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer people; or, "LGBTQ"). The teacher Gabriel Stängle started an online petition against this plan and called it a "re-education plan." Almost 200,000 people signed the petition, including 82,000 people from Baden-Württemberg. Supporters of the petition included the Evangelical Alliance in Germany, the AfD state-association of Baden-Württemberg, and the CDU (at this time, in the state parliament opposition). The petition called for recognition of the rights of parents in educational issues and voiced opposition to the subject of sexual plurality being treated in an interdisciplinary way. Several of the demonstrations in Stuttgart (six overall), were organized under the motto "Demo for All," following the slogan and movement "La Manif Pour Tous" in France, which opposed the introduction of same-sex marriage. Hundreds of thousands of protesters participated in Paris at that time. It is noteworthy that educational plans for more liberal and inclusive sex education existed in other states; therefore, marches against the plans were also taking place in Lower Saxony, Bremen, Berlin, and North Rhine-Westphalia (Billmann 2015, pp. 3–5).

The fourth demonstration in Stuttgart, on June 28, 2014, was dedicated to the slogan "Marriage and Family First—Stop Gender Ideology- and Sexualizing our Children." About 700–1000 people participated. The moderator at this event was Hedwig von Beverfoerde, who is the spokeswoman of the Initiative Family-Protection (Initiative Familienschutz), a group that is part of the Civil Coalition (Zivile

Koalition). Both the Initiative Family-Protection and the Civil Coalition belong to a right-wing-conservative network connected to the European delegate and AfD member Beatrix von Storch and her husband, Sven von Storch (Teidelbaum 2015, p. 6). The "Civil Coalition" was founded as a campaign network in 2004 by Beatrix von Storch, her husband, and seven other members of her family, all descendants of the German high nobility (Ankenbrand 2014).[31] In 2014, von Storch became an AfD-delegate in the EU parliament and was active in the network of European Conservatives and Reformers (ECR) as well as the European Christian Political Movement (ECPM). In 2016, she had to leave both groups because of a statement in which she defended the use of firearms against refugees at the German border. Afterwards, she became a member of the EU parliamentary groups "Europe for Freedom and Direct Democracy" and "Europe of Nations and Freedom." The UK Independence Party (UKIP), the French Front National, the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ), and the Dutch Partiij voor de Vrijheid are also members of these later groups; von Storch's involvement with them, along with her position in the AfD, is a sign of theAfD's turn to the right.

Beatrix von Storch's cousin, Paul von Oldenburg, is active in the Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property, an organization that was originally founded in Brazil as the Sociedade Brasileira de Defesa da Tradição, Família e Propriedade (TFP); in part as an opponent to land reform, but also to progressive Catholicism and, in particular, Liberation Theology. The TFP defends a return to a "Catholic hierarchy," and is against all sorts of "equality-ideologies"; no matter whether they include the equal treatment of entrepreneurs, workers, men and women, or homo- and heterosexuals. The TFP has stated, "This egalitarian idea of the world is totally false. Holy Scriptures, the Magisterium of the Church, sound philosophy and the teaching of the Church Doctors, all clearly state that proportional inequalities are good in themselves, and that God created an unequal and hierarchical universe. The whole universe is a symphony of inequalities, where each being represents a different note, and the whole order of things results in harmony" (Solimeo 2011).

[31] To be sure, Beatrix von Storch and her followers in the AfD do not advocate for a restoration of the German nobility; however, they want to have the interests of the nobility protected (e. g. by tax privileges) (Amann 2017, p. 129). In the 1990s, she was active in the battle for reparations from the state authority for the loss of a three million hectare estate by her family, which was confiscated after the war in the Soviet occupation zone (Amann 2017, p. 65). Her grandfather, Johann Ludwig "Lutz" Graf Schwerin von Krosigk, was, under Adolf Hitler, Minister of Finance from 1932 to 1945. Beatrix von Storch is described by many to have a conservative and economic neoliberal political outlook. In fact, von Storch is a member of the Friedrich August von Hayek-Gesellschaft, an organization that tries to maintain the legacy of this eponymous liberal economist, and she was for a short time a member of the neoliberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) (Amann 2017, p. 64). More important though is that Amann and others attest her to be determined activist in the conservative arena of protecting the traditional family against the "abortion-industry," the "homo- and gender-lobby," the protection of the house-wife against "quota-terror," and children against "early-sexualisation." It was with these subjects that von Storch was able to assemble an electoral group deeply disappointed by other parties, including anti-abortionists and ultraconservatives, which donated substantial sums of money to the AfD (Amann 2017, pp. 66–67).

Overall, the institution of the traditional family takes up broad room in the AfD party program; it is referred to forty-one times, and defense of the "the family" is considered its guiding principle. As the following examples show, the subject family and marriage are tied to many kinds of other issues; and, again, images abound of "protection" against "threat" by social forces and changes: "The picture of the traditional family must not be destroyed," (AfD 2017, p. 53) "larger families instead of mass migration," (AfD 2017, p. 40) "[a]ppreciation and respect for the traditional family continues to decline in Germany" (AfD 2017, p. 43).[32] It is worth mentioning how the realm of family, education, and the rejection of individualism as a value in modern society are connected in AfD proclamations: "The increased trend of allowing government institutions such as day-care facilities and full-time schools to raise our children, the implementation of gender mainstreaming projects,[33] and the general focus on individuality, all contribute to undermine the family as a significant and fundamental unit of society" (AfD 2017, p. 40). Again the similarities to the mid-18th-century are striking. Roberta Garner writes in her analysis of conservative ideology that stability and order in social institutions, not individual rights, were seen by the early conservatives as the basis of a good society. Overall for them, the examples of the industrial and political revolutions were warnings, largely similar to today's pronouncements by the AfD: "The individual needs *authority, tradition, community*, and *hierarchy* to make sense out of life. Human beings exist only as members of a society; the 'individual' is a fiction, because language, tradition, values, and family always shape each person and precede his or her existence. Therefore, society cannot be based on an ideology of individualism" (Garner 1996, p. 110, emphasis in the original).

These aspects—authority, tradition, community, and hierarchy—bring us to the last points. Formulated as a question, are there affinities between the AfD and conservative Christians, notably Christian Fundamentalists and evangelicals related to the above stated tenets and attitudes? If so, do conservative Christians form an important part of the AfD electorate? Several studies on the relationship between right-wing extremism, right-wing populism, and Christian evangelicalism and fundamentalism suggest that indeed these Christian groups and movements are more prone to right-wing attitudes such as sexism, islamophobia, homophobia, and anti-Semitism (Strube 2015b). One aspect that plays a role, according to these researchers, is that these currents have a strong tendency to establish a clear order of "good" and "bad," a greater acceptance of authorities, and an impulse toward conformity. This reduction of the real world—which is always ambiguous, contingent, and equivocal—into something unequivocal and unambiguous means, ultimately, an elimination of the uniqueness of every human being (Strube 2015b, 12–13). This search for clarity

[32] This is, by the way, not reflecting reality, as current statistics show. In a representative survey of the Federal Ministry for Family, two-thirds of the interviewees responded that the family is for them a way to achieve happiness (BMFSFJ 2012, p. 12). A family is made of, for the respondents, a mother, father and at least one child. In 2013, the dominant family (almost 70%) was the one where a mother and father raised at least one child (Statistisches Bundesamt 2014, p. 52).

[33] Gender mainstreaming is a public policy concept of assessing the different implications for women and men of any planned policy action, including legislation and programs, in all areas and levels. The EU included gender-mainstreaming in the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997.

gains specific attraction in times of perceived crisis, when modernity impels a plurality of life-styles and their general acceptance by society. Here theologian Gisa Bauer's research is relevant. Bauer's habilitation analyzed the relationship between the German evangelical movement and the Protestant Church and described a history of conflict over issues of modernity and pluralism. Despite tendencies toward pluralization within the evangelical movement since the 1980s, she concluded that the evangelical rhetoric and identity is marked by a long-standing criticism of pluralism and enlightenment, or, in fact, modernity (Bauer 2012, p. 660).

In this regard, and when considering the importance of conservative Christians within the AfD, a closer look at the group "Christians in the AfD (ChrAfD)" is necessary. To be sure, this is not an influential group within the AfD.[34] Therefore, the relevant question is not how large a part does conservative Christianity play within the AfD, but rather how large an influence do the AfD and its allies have upon conservative Christians. Whereas the AfD has about 28,000 members, the subgroup ChrAfD has reached only numbers in the hundreds (Kamann 2017). This estimate is given by the former chairwoman of its federal board, Anette Schultner. She also estimates that sixty percent of the group are Catholics. The rest belong to the Protestant Church of Germany or the so-called free churches (ibid.). Schultner herself belongs to a Free Protestant church community. Others on the board of "Christians in the AfD" include Joachim Kuhs (a member of an independent Anglican church), Klaus Sydow (Protestant-free-church "Freier Brüderkreis"), and Martina Kempf (Pentecostal church). It is noteworthy that Anette Schultner and Hubertus von Below, another prominent leader within the group, left the AfD in October and September, 2018, respectively. Both explained their decision by citing the move to the right within the AfD (Fiedler 2017; Kemper 2017).

7 Conclusion

How could conservative Christian religious positions have become aligned with right-wing political activism? Is there a convergence of conservative religious and right-wing populist beliefs, and if the answer is "yes," what is the content of the overlap? These were the main questions at the beginning of this article. To provide answers, I have described the general history of the AfD, the biographies of prominent AfD founders and leaders, and the forms of agreement between conservative religious and right-wing positions.

To illustrate key instances of overlap, we can look at two founders and former leaders of the AfD, Bernd Lucke and Frauke Petry (both of whom ultimately left the party); they are significant for their Christian affiliations. They were both particularly active in their churches—Lucke in the Protestant Reformed Church and Petry in the traditional Protestant Church. In Petry's case, Grace Davie's famous description of

[34] Also the statistical survey based on biographical information on the AfD delegates in the Bundestag clearly indicates that the AfD has no Christian profile. Of the 92 delegates only nine gave information about their religious affiliation (3 Protestants and 8 Catholics); 78 refused to give personal details on their religious affiliation (Holzapfel 2017, p. 318).

European Christianity as a "belonging without believing" is conceivably accurate (Davie 2000); whether or not Petry is privately devout in her beliefs, her religious activity seems more related to a cultural affinity for the musical traditions of German Protestantism. Her church participation is somewhat surprising for a person whose roots are in eastern Germany where Christians are still a tiny minority. It seems, therefore, that not only are political convictions important for the success of AfD leaders, but also, to a certain extent, middle-class institutional Christian backgrounds and related experiences. Her case clearly shows that the AfD is able to cater to people with vastly different biographies, even to people who grew up in two different states and political systems.

The most direct connection between right-wing populism and conservative Christianity is the AfD's reference to the Christian tradition as the main ingredient of German culture. This German culture and Christianity is, for the AfD, under threat by Muslim immigrants and refugees and needs to be protected. As distinct from other parties, such as the CDU and the CSU (who have the term "Christian" in their party names), there is no reference by the AfD to what "Christian tradition" means. The anti-immigration stance of the AfD, however, makes clear what it does not consider part of the Christian tradition: empathy for refugees. Furthermore, within the AfD, racial connotations are often mixed with the goal of protecting German culture and tradition. Comparing multiculturalism with ethno-suicide, or commentaries such as "The German people are a design of God" (Bednarz 2017, p. 23), are examples of the overlap that exists between right-wing populism, German nationalism, and Christian themes.

Another, much more prominent but less direct, connection between conservative Christianity and right-wing populism is the family-planning policy of the AfD. Under the heading "more children than immigration" (AfD 2017, p. 41), the AfD places precedence for an "active family-policy" and German population growth over allowing immigration. In this context, the party also criticizes abortion rates. Finally, according to the AfD, the traditional family is under threat because other forms of family, such as same-sex marriages, are placed legally in Germany on an equal footing with heterosexual marriages. Where conservative Christians and the right-wing populist AfD meet thematically, therefore, there are the following issues: defense of the traditional heterosexual family, defense of traditional gender roles (or against gender-mainstreaming), and an anti-abortion position.

This overlap explains, at least partially, why the AfD has pulled voters away from the CDU. As observers (Bebnowski 2015, p. 1) and AfD-insiders have noted, there is a representation gap within the CDU for conservative Christians. It seems safe to say that a large part of the traditional conservative-Christian clientele of the CDU, and probably also the CSU, has moved to the AfD. A change in the agenda of the CDU toward the center is, therefore, also partially responsible for the success of the AfD. Since leading AfD-Christians have left the AfD after the federal election of September, 2017, declaring that the right-wing shift within the party was their main incentive, it is an open question whether this electorate will return in the future to the CDU or turn to parties that might be established by former AfD-members. Frauke Petry and her husband have already announced such ambitions.

An analysis of the AfD also indicates that the common denominator within the constituency of the party in eastern and western Germany is primarily a conservativism that has varying roots but joins around the same program: pro-family, nationalist, anti-immigrant, anti-liberal, and anti-pluralistic. In the former GDR, this conservativism dates back to the experiences of the profound societal changes of 1989 and 1990, which drive the high approval rates for the AfD there. In western Germany, however, approval for the AfD seems to have much more diverse sources: from Catholic traditionalists and defenders of a pre-Vatican order to anti-abortionists and libertarians. This coming together under a single party program illustrates how people who have no common experiences or shared backgrounds come together in the same political party. This assemblage of disparate motivations, combined with the religious profile of certain AfD politicians, suggests that subjects such as abortion, family, fear of Islam, and persecution of Christians are placed on the party agenda for the purpose of winning votes from the conservative Christian constituency. It is not necessarily an alliance between right-wing political forces and conservative Christians; hence a political-religious project of faith.

A more problematic issue exists for democracy at large: parts of a conservative, evangelical, fundamentalist Protestant and Catholic constituency are only too willing to adopt the AfD discourse, although in principle it contradicts Christian universalistic principles. The reason for this embracing is most likely a perception of the previously mentioned representation gap, combined with a fear of social transformation. Indeed, it is the anti-immigrant, nationalist discourse, coupled with concerns about abortion, family, and traditional gender roles, that overcome Christian spiritual principles that teach compassion for the sufferers, here refugees. In sum, the AfD unites in its ranks and constituency a whole range of different activists and ideologies, of which conservative Christians form only a small part of the support base. This synthesis, combined with a cultural reactionism, is what makes the AfD a new political phenomenon—attractive to both conservative Christians and other voters who perceive themselves as disenfranchised and endangered by social, economic, and political forces beyond their control.

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