

## Becoming non-affiliated. A mixed-methods study on leaving the church in Austria and Vienna

Desirée Krivanek<sup>1</sup> and Caroline Berghammer<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (IIASA, VID/ÖAW, WU), Vienna Institute of Demography/Austrian Academy of Sciences

<sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology, University of Vienna

The religious composition of the Austrian population changed substantially since the 1960s. The major shift concerned the Catholic church which lost almost 30% of its members. The highest figure during this period was recorded as recently as 2010 when more than 85,000 Catholics (or 1.6%) left in the wake of the disclosure of a series of abuses in Catholic institutions. The aim of the present study is to understand from a life-course perspective the reasons why Catholics drop out of church as well as the timing of their exit, linking it to life events and experiences. Leaving the church to become non-affiliated is the main driver behind the on-going decline of the Catholic population in Austria, while the contribution of other processes – religious conversion, migration, fertility differentials – is comparatively limited (Goujon, et al., 2007). Until the beginning of the 1960s, 90% of the Austrian population was still Catholic while 64% are at present. This downward trend is expected to continue in the future and Catholics are estimated to be a minority of below 50% by the middle of this century (Goujon, et al., 2007). Vienna, the capital and second-largest city in the German-speaking region, reached this number already more than a decade ago in 2001. Within Europe, Austria belongs to the 15 countries of the European Union with a Catholic majority, ranking at the ninth place (Pew Research Center, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

A study on leaving the Catholic church is particularly rewarding in Austria since the definition of (not) belonging is more clear-cut than in most other countries. After entering the Catholic church through baptism, adherents have the duty to pay church tax from the time they are on the labour market. This tax amounts to about one percent of the gross income and needs to be actively transferred yearly or quarterly, i.e. it is not automatically deduced with other taxes. Belonging to the Catholic church in Austria thus incurs non-negligible and visible financial consequences. From the age of 14, members can declare their leaving the church before a public authority. This situation has implications for measurement: In most contexts “[b]elonging to a denomination for many people is not a matter of saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’” (Billiet, 2007: 357) because it reflects a mixture of formal criteria, subjective feelings and degree of commitment. We argue that Austrians’ understanding of being

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<sup>1</sup> Countries where more than 50% of the population was Catholic in 2010 are (in decreasing order): Malta, Portugal, Poland, Croatia, Ireland, Lithuania, Italy, Slovakia, Austria, Spain, Slovenia, Luxembourg, Belgium, Hungary and France.

(non-)affiliated is rather homogeneous and the point in time when someone left the church is known. Such a clear definition is advantageous for research purposes.

This study adds to the prior literature by assuming a life-course approach based on retrospective data and by combining qualitative and quantitative methods. The mixed-methods design blends an in-depth understanding of the subjects' own perceptions with the advantages of being able to draw firm conclusions based on a representative large-scale survey. Through our longitudinal approach, we situate leaving the church in a life-course context thereby linking it to other important experiences and events. Instead of treating being Catholic or non-affiliated as alternatives at a certain point in life as in a cross-sectional design, this dynamic view allows us to gain closer insights into the causal ordering of leaving the church and other events such as entering the labour market. Quantitative data on the exact time of leaving the church are very rare and few studies have thus taken such an approach (but see: Need and De Graaf, 1996, Te Grotenhuis and Scheepers, 2001).

We base our analysis, first, on 20 qualitative interviews which were conducted in 2012/13 with former Catholics who had dropped out of the church. Using Grounded Theory, we analysed the reasons that church members had for leaving the church. Second, we employ the Generations and Gender Survey 2012/13, a representative sample of 3,157 Catholic and non-affiliated respondents in the age group 22-49. These data contain information on the month and year of leaving the church and are analysed with event history analysis. Throughout this study, we focus on the regional distinction between Austria and Vienna which is in the vanguard of the secularisation development.

## **Literature**

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