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Saving the People

How Populists Hijack Religion

**Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell
and Olivier Roy (eds)**

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(Editors)

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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>List of Tables and Figures</i>	ix
<i>Contributors</i>	xi
1. Populism and Religion <i>Nadia Marzouki and Duncan McDonnell</i>	1
2. The Lega Nord: The New Saviour of Northern Italy <i>Duncan McDonnell</i>	13
3. The 'Religious Conversion' of the Austrian Freedom Party <i>Leila Hadj-Abdou</i>	29
4. Populism and Islam in Switzerland: The Role of the Swiss People's Party <i>Oscar Mazzoleni</i>	47
5. Using Faith to Exclude: The Role of Religion in Dutch Populism <i>Stijn van Kessel</i>	61
6. The French National Front: From Christian Identity to <i>Laïcité</i> <i>Olivier Roy</i>	79
7. Religion and Populism in Britain: An Infertile Breeding Ground? <i>Timothy Peace</i>	95
8. Defenders of the Cross: Populist Politics and Religion in Post-Communist Poland <i>Ben Stanley</i>	109
9. 'The God of Hungarians': Religion and Right-Wing Populism in Hungary <i>Zoltán Ádám and András Bozóki</i>	129
10. The Tea Party and Religion: Between Religious and Historical Fundamentalism <i>Nadia Marzouki</i>	149
11. 'We Are Also the (Chosen) People, You Are Not': The Case of Shas' Populism <i>Dani Filc</i>	167

CONTENTS

12. Beyond Populism: The Conservative Right, the Courts, the Churches and the Concept of a Christian Europe	<i>Olivier Roy</i>	185
<i>Notes</i>		203
<i>Bibliography</i>		247
<i>Index</i>		275

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Nadia Marzouki, Paris
Duncan McDonnell, Brisbane
Olivier Roy, Florence

December 2015

ing transformation of Italy into a multi-ethnic/multi-religious society,⁵⁵ and the Lega has certainly used both this tradition and the transformation brought by immigration to its political advantage. Although the party initially did not position itself as the defender of Catholic traditions against secular elites and immigrants, but rather focused on 'the southerner' as its key 'other', and dismissed the Church as another block of elites acting against the interests of the people, it changed strategy after 2000. In the ensuing decade the party not only used religion far more to frame issues and set the political agenda, but—especially during its years in government—the LN and the Church moved from a position of confrontation to, at times, mutual recognition of each other's roles and tentative agreement on a range of issues. While this relationship has since returned to a more confrontational footing and appears susceptible to change depending on events and specific leaders, what seems unlikely to change is the Lega's religiously-based conceptualisation of 'people' and 'others' that has served it so well over the past fifteen years.

THE 'RELIGIOUS CONVERSION' OF THE AUSTRIAN FREEDOM PARTY

Leila Hadj-Abdou

The Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ—Austrian Freedom Party) has been one of the most successful populist right-wing parties in Europe over the past three decades. From the late 1980s onwards, it witnessed a remarkable rise, which led to its participation in national government after the 1999 general election.¹ Even after having to cope with dramatic losses at the ballot boxes in 2002, which ultimately caused the party to split in 2005 into the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ), led by Jörg Haider,² and the FPÖ, now led by Heinz-Christian Strache, the far right recovered. In the 2013 general election, the FPÖ gained 20.5 per cent of the vote, while the BZÖ received only 3.5 per cent (BMI 2013). The rise of the FPÖ was accompanied by some remarkable programmatic developments, among which was the adoption of a pro-Christian stance. In the party manifesto, adopted in 1997 under Haider's leadership, a commitment to Christianity was included. This commitment has been further strengthened since. For instance, when the decision of the European Court of Human Rights (to remove the Christian crucifix from public schools in order to guarantee children's right to a secular educa-

tion) in the *Lautsi v. Italy* case sparked a Europe-wide debate, the Freedom Party took a clear pro-religious stance.

This evolution is highly puzzling for two reasons: first, the party had traditionally been characterised by a fierce anti-clericalism. In terms of political ideology, the FPÖ represents the 'third camp' which developed in the nineteenth century as a political movement advocating the idea of Pan-Germanism. Anti-clericalism is a central pillar of the ideology of the pan-German movement. In line with its ideological roots, until 1997 the party had never openly departed from its anti-clerical stance. Second, this 'conversion' happened at a time when the Catholic Church had lost a significant degree of support among the Austrian population. The decline was triggered by several cases of child abuse committed by representatives of the Church, which were made public from the mid-1990s onwards. In 1995, it was revealed that the Primate of the Austrian Church, Hans Hermann Gröer, had committed sexual abuse. Within a month, the Gröer affair had caused 5,500 Austrians to leave the Church.³ Such incidents were often played down by the Church. Not least as a consequence of these and other scandals, the number of people leaving the Catholic Church increased steadily, reaching a peak in 2010, when 85,960 people left.⁴ Furthermore, not only are the numbers of those faithful to the Catholic Church in decline, but so too are the numbers of those professing any religious belief at all. The European Values Survey shows that since the 1990s the number of people who perceive themselves as religious has constantly decreased. While in 1999, 82.9 per cent of Austrians declared themselves to believe in God, this number had decreased to 73.3 per cent by 2008.⁵

Given the ideological roots of the party, as well as the societal context, the 'religious conversion' of the Freedom Party is therefore surprising at first glance. This chapter aims to explore the role that religion plays within the Austrian populist right and tries to understand how this 'religious turn' can be interpreted. It is guided by the assumption that religion does not represent a core element of the party's ideology in the sense that religious dogmas do not determine its fundamental ideas about how society should work. Instead, it is argued that (a) the adaptation of the party position on religion is an expression of the transformation of the FPÖ from a traditional far right niche party into a right-wing populist political force, and that (b) religion is used in an instrumental way within the framework of the party's anti-Islamic agenda.

The chapter is divided into the following sections: in the first section, the evolution of the party in terms of its position on religion is traced. I argue that

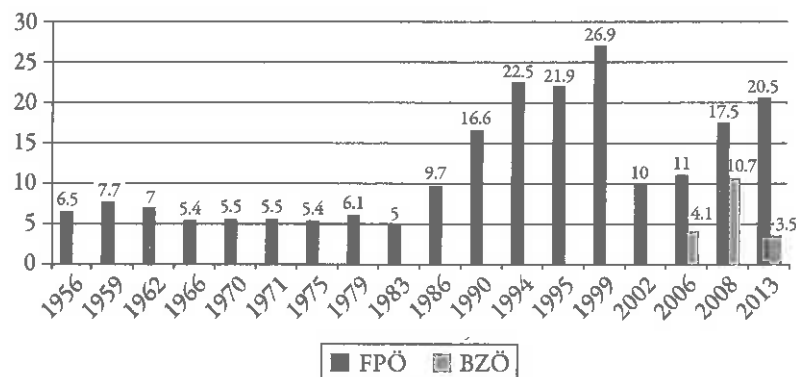
the religious repositioning is closely related to the party's endorsement of Austrian patriotism, founded on the legacy of the old imperial Austria and its mission to be a 'bulwark of Christianity'. In the second section, I discuss the evolution of the party's anti-Islamic agenda. In this section, religion is shown to be primarily used as a tool to stir up anti-immigrant sentiment and to legitimize claims for the restriction of immigration. In the third section, relations between the Church and the party are discussed and conflicting issues are pointed out. This section reflects on the fact that although there is some exchange and ideological overlap with conservative parts of the Church, dissent and conflict override any consensus between the Austrian clergy and the party. Finally, it is worth noting that although the Austrian radical right has been split into two parties since 2005, the focus of this chapter is restricted to the Freedom Party (FPÖ). This reflects the fact that the FPÖ is the more relevant party in terms of electoral strength (see Figure 3.1). Moreover, in the 2013 general elections, the BZÖ failed to gain any seats in the national parliament. Both parties are characterised by very similar rhetoric and similar ideas.⁶

The Evolution of the Freedom Party: from an Anti-Clerical Right-Wing Niche Party to a Successful Pro-Christian Populist Party

Historical Anti-Clerical Roots and Liberal Rapprochement

According to Ludger Helms,⁷ two kinds of right-wing populist parties can be distinguished: the first type comprises parties which are newly founded, and

Fig. 3.1: General Election Results of the Austrian Far Right, 1956–2013



Source: Elaboration of data from the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior (BMI).

the second are parties which emerge as a result of the transformation of an established party into a populist radical right party. The Austrian Freedom Party belongs to the second category. While it was founded in 1956, its ideological roots date much further back as an offshoot of the German nationalist movement. This movement is also called 'the third camp', as it has traditionally been the third force in Austrian politics, beside the Catholic Conservatives and the Social Democrats. One central, unifying element of the movement, apart from its pan-German orientation, was its anti-clericalism. This strong anti-clerical position, which characterized the Freedom Party for many decades, resulted from the formation of the third camp in opposition to the Habsburg Empire. For centuries the *raison d'être* of the empire had been its role as a defender of Christian Europe against the East,⁸ thus championing the Christian West (*Abendland*). 'This was the only principle that gave the Habsburg Empire, this patchwork in the middle of the European map, some form of [character logically legitimating its existence],' Weiss argues.⁹ With the French Revolution of 1789, the idea of Europe replaced the idea of a Christian *Abendland*. The Habsburg concept of the Christian West 'became an imaginative construction that no longer fitted the historical reality.'¹⁰ The German nationalists of the nineteenth century despised the supposed backwardness of Catholic Austria, while they associated the German Empire with progress and economic success.¹¹ In contrast to the other political camps in Austria, overall the Freedom Party remained loyal to its German national roots and, in line with this, maintained its anti-clerical position. This dogmatism isolated the party considerably, and as a result weakened its political influence.¹²

While the first discussions about opening up the FPÖ ideologically and giving it a more liberal make-up emerged in the mid-1960s, it was not until the late 1970s that a liberal ideology gained any momentum within the party. During this period, an initial rapprochement with Christian Churches also took place. Two Christian working groups, one Catholic and one Protestant, were set up within the party in the early 1980s.¹³ According to Friedhelm Frischenschlager, a leading FPÖ politician at the time, the creation of the working group 'Freedomite Catholics' aimed to reduce the prejudice and misunderstandings which had hampered dialogue with the leadership of the Catholic Church ever since the foundation of the Freedom Party.¹⁴ The opposition to totalitarian, anti-liberal and collectivist ideas and state-forms was identified by Frischenschlager as a common denominator of Catholicism and the party.¹⁵ The rapprochement with the Church was limited, however. For example, the party continued to disagree with the Church on the question of

abortion.¹⁶ Moreover, the ideological broadening of the party was confined to its leadership. At grassroots level, a strong orientation towards traditional, German nationalist, anti-clerical ideas prevailed.

New Orientation under the Leadership of Haider

The ideological gap between the management and the grassroots levels of the FPÖ resulted in an abrupt change of leadership. At a party congress in 1986, a liberal-minded group led by Norbert Steger was pushed out of the party and Jörg Haider was declared the new party leader. Paradoxically, although it was the party's traditional (anti-clerical, pan-German) elements that enabled him to first take power, it was Haider who eventually achieved a break with these traditions. He realised that in order to boost the party's electoral strength it had to be radically refashioned since the national cleavage had become increasingly irrelevant. In the late 1980s, only 6 per cent of the Austrian population perceived themselves as German.¹⁷

In order to broaden its appeal, the FPÖ distanced itself from its German nationalist roots over the course of the 1990s, with the former pan-German ideology widely substituted with Austrian patriotism. This programmatic shift was additionally triggered by the fact that Austria in the early 1990s faced decisive demographic and political changes which provided fertile ground for political mobilisation based on claims of identity: firstly, after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, Austria witnessed a significant increase in immigration. Between 1987 and 1994, the number of foreigners residing in Austria doubled.¹⁸ This development was accompanied by a considerable anti-immigrant backlash.¹⁹ Secondly, in 1995 Austria became a member of the European Union. The accession process also promoted concerns about a potential loss of Austrian identity, which the major parties—the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the Social Democrats (SPÖ)—could not sufficiently address. During the early 1990s especially, the ÖVP had developed a strong self-image as a pro-European party, which was beginning to override its previous commitment to Austrian patriotism.²⁰ The SPÖ also placed strong emphasis on Europe, and largely refrained from focusing on national identity.²¹ The FPÖ clearly tried to fill this political vacuum.

In times of such far-reaching change, the party promised its potential voters 'a return to the national roots in the sense of an idealised status quo ante,' as Reinhard Heinisch puts it.²² While the FPÖ has historically developed itself in opposition to the old, Catholic and conservative Austria, the party's success

in the 1990s was widely based on the invocation of precisely this 'good old' Austria. 'What we need is a clear return to these values and virtues [...] that have been lost in the past [...]', Haider emphasised.²³ In a nutshell, the Freedomites cast themselves as true representatives of the Austrian people and their traditional values and needs, and as a voice against those who were depicted as endangering the preservation of these values and the fulfilment of these needs: most notably, political elites and immigrants. In line with this new image, Haider described himself in interviews²⁴ as the 'chosen' one, the 'icon of civil resistance'.

Being a declared advocate of the 'people', the new FPÖ on the one hand had a strong 'egalitarian' agenda,²⁵ which manifested itself in its articulated hostility against the political elite and those societal groups that benefited from the status quo. This 'egalitarianism', on the other hand, was combined with an anti-egalitarian stance against immigrants, a stance based upon the classical right-wing populist understanding of the 'demos' as 'ethnos'.²⁶

Endorsement of Christianity, a Dimension of Austrian Patriotism

The transformation of the party under Haider culminated in the adoption of a new party programme in 1997, which, for the first time at that level of the party, displayed a strong commitment to Austrian patriotism as well as to Christianity. In the manifesto, the party explicitly distanced itself from anti-clericalism, which it defined as 'outdated' in light of 'the changed role of ecclesiastical and religious institutions'.²⁷ Instead, Christianity was identified as the 'spiritual foundation of Europe'²⁸ and was equated with Western values.²⁹ These values were depicted as being endangered by 'the increasing fundamentalism of radical Islam which is penetrating Europe, as well as hedonistic consumption, aggressive capitalism, increasing occultism, pseudo-religious sects and an omnipresent nihilism [...]'.³⁰ Christian Churches were defined as the 'ideal partners' for the Freedom Party in preserving these sets of values, 'even if they sometimes take other positions on political issues'.³¹ This endorsement of Christianity was not meant to convey an ideological congruence with Church dogmas. Instead, the significance of Christianity in the party manifesto was confined to an understanding of religion as culture, an idea which in turn aimed at mobilising demands based on identity. The reference to Christianity as the 'spiritual foundation of Europe' reasserted the Habsburg conception of Europe as the Christian West. It complemented the Freedom Party's claim to be the new, true defender of Austrian identity in times of increasing European integration and

ethno-cultural diversification. In line with this new vision, one of Haider's stock phrases in the 1990s in his fight against immigration was: 'We did not fight the Turkish wars in order to let Turkish immigrants now come into Austria, but in order to keep them out'.³²

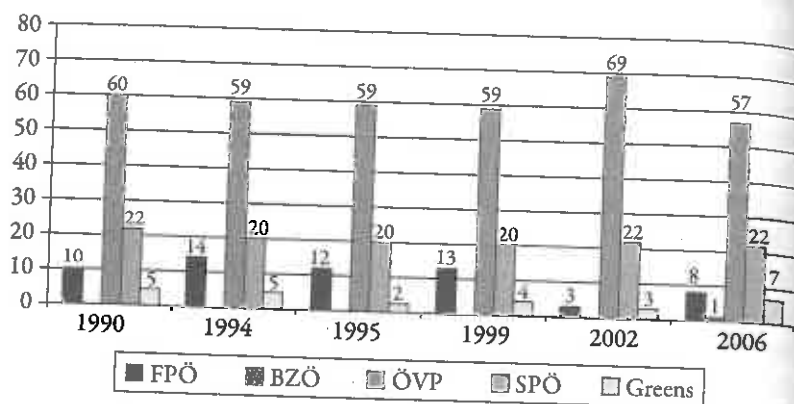
These programmatic changes, however, became a matter of fierce contestation within the party, reflecting the allegiance of the majority of party members to the German national roots of the FPÖ. The Viennese branch of the party, in particular, was among the strongest opponents of the endorsement of Christianity in 1997. The Freedom Party was about 'Honour, Freedom and Fatherland' and not about 'Poverty, Chastity, Obedience,' argued Rüdiger Stix, a Viennese Freedomite politician.³³ After the draft of the new party programme was made public, a call was circulated within the party to protest against these new developments. Among those supporting this call was Heinz-Christian Strache, the future leader of the FPÖ.³⁴ The adoption of the manifesto eventually provoked some party members who were deeply committed to the anti-clerical tradition of the FPÖ to renounce their party membership.³⁵

While the new profile did not necessarily resonate with the party's ideological roots or the convictions of its members, it was sufficient to mobilise the Austrian electorate to vote for the FPÖ. In fact, the subsequent 1999 general election produced the best result in the history of the party to date (see Figure 3.1). It is important, however, to stress that it was not the religious segments of the Austrian electorate to whom the party was appealing. Although the FPÖ was able to slightly increase its vote share among religious people, it continued to be a party mostly voted for by the secular population. Among the majority of voters with religious affiliations, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) has been, and remains, the most attractive party (see Figure 3.2). The FPÖ's real winning formula was thus not its appeal to Christian voters, but its ability to mobilise those who felt inclined towards the 'idealised status quo ante', of which Christianity represented a symbol. Apart from a successful attempt to attract new voters, this 'religious conversion' also reflected the office-seeking character of the Freedom Party in the 1990s. According to Richard Luther, the reference to Christianity served also to facilitate cooperation with the ÖVP, which was regarded by the FPÖ as a potential coalition partner.³⁶

The Construction of a New Outsider Group: from 'Bogus Asylum Seekers' to the Threat of 'Muslim Immigration'

Alongside its new commitment to Christianity, the FPÖ in the 1990s also made Islam a key concern. While immigrants from Muslim backgrounds,

Fig. 3.2: Voting Behaviour of Voters with Strong Denominational Affiliation by Political Party, in Percentages, 1990–2006



Source: Plasser and Ullram 2008, p. 64.

particularly those from Turkey, had been the subject of FPÖ anti-immigrant rhetoric in the past, the 1990s clearly marked a shift in party discourse as (Turkish) immigrants began to be seen as the Muslim 'other'. 'The social order of Islam is diametrically opposed to our Christian values,' Haider stated in his first book, *The Freedom I Mean*.³⁷ It is important to note, however, that despite this new attention to Islam and Christianity other themes such as 'bogus asylum seekers' and 'criminal aliens' dominated the political rhetoric of the party. The reticence towards 'playing the Islamic card' more heavily during Haider's leadership, Hödl suggests, might be a side-effect of Haider's political connections during these years with the Libyan president Muammar al-Gaddafi and the Iraqi president Saddam Hussein.³⁸

During the populist radical right's participation in national government (2000–2007), Islam was not a major issue either, although targeting Islam was, in an ambivalent manner, part of the party's rhetorical repertoire. After the attacks on 11 September 2001, the Freedom Party positioned itself against a 'global condemnation of all members of the Islamic religious community', and stated firmly that religious freedom and respect for members of all religious communities were cornerstones of the party's ideology.³⁹ In 2004, too, the FPÖ did not utter a single word of protest when the ÖVP Minister of Education, reacting to a school conflict over Muslim veiling, issued a decree endorsing the Islamic headscarf as an expression of religious freedom.⁴⁰ On

other occasions during the same period, however, the FPÖ regularly targeted Islamic practices, including the wearing of the Muslim headscarf. The party in sum followed a double strategy, which reflected its difficult position as a member of government. On the one hand, it wanted to prevent the alienation of its voters, who were attracted by the radical nature of its claims. On the other, it had to compromise its political standpoints and to de-radicalise its rhetoric in order to maintain a good basis for cooperation with its coalition partner, the ÖVP. The FPÖ also had to cope with the situation of being the subject of international attention.⁴¹ In response to international protests about the FPÖ's participation in the ruling coalition, the government had signed a declaration promising to avoid racism and xenophobia, and to act in full accordance with European values.⁴²

From the mid-2000s onwards, however, following the party's split—into the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ) and the Freedom Party (FPÖ)—Islam became one of the most prominent issues in the political mobilisation of the latter. The split resulted from the pressure of incumbency and the dramatic decrease in votes in the early 2000s. At the 2002 general election, the FPÖ took only 10 per cent of the vote. Inner conflicts emerged, which eventually led to the bifurcation of the radical right in 2005. The BZÖ, under the control of Jörg Haider, stayed in government until 2007, and in that role still came under pressure to tone down the radicalism of its political agenda. The Freedom Party, now led by Heinz-Christian Strache, went into opposition. Strache used the issues of Islam and Muslim immigration as means of sharpening the political profile of the FPÖ against its political competitors. Since the Islamic religious community is officially recognized in Austria, the anti-Muslim agenda did not merely suit the traditional anti-immigrant orientation of the party: it also had the potential to strengthen anew the party's image as being against the status quo and the rules set by the political establishment. The FPÖ's strengthened anti-Islamic agenda also matched the increasing level of anti-Muslim sentiment within the Austrian population. In the 1999 European Value Survey, 15 per cent of Austrian respondents said that they did not want to live next door to a Muslim. In the 2000s, this number more than doubled. In 2008, 31 per cent of respondents stated that they did not want to have a Muslim neighbour.⁴³

In essence, the anti-Islamic agenda of the FPÖ under Strache relies on two main arguments. The first argument is that fundamental Islam poses a threat to national security. The second argument is that Islam is a fundamentally alien culture, which threatens the cultural identity of the Austrian nation

state. The concept of cultural identity as used in the party's discourse remains rather vague. While it relies strongly on the abstract notion of 'Christian western values', it is, however, also partly based on liberal values, such as gender equality.⁴⁴ Cultural identity is also equated with national customs, such as the consumption of pork. Claims used in political campaigning like 'Free Women Not Forced Veiling' (*Freie Frauen statt Kopftuchzwang*), which was used in the general elections in 2006, co-exist with statements from party representatives, such as 'Pork Chop Not Minaret' (*Schweinskotelet statt Minarett*).⁴⁵ The party thus combines forms of cultural 'othering' with illiberal liberalism, the idea that some immigrant cultures—particularly Muslim ones—contradict liberal universal values, and thus do not belong in the liberal societies in which they now live.⁴⁶ In the rhetoric of the FPÖ, Islam is constructed as a monolithic entity, endorsing a culture which is irreconcilable with that of Western societies.⁴⁷ The party's solution, to address both cultural and security threats, is to restrict immigration. In other words, Islam is used in the party's rhetoric as a simple synonym for unwanted immigration and immigrants. Several of the party's anti-immigrant campaigns have relied on explicit slogans, such as *Pummerin statt Muezzin* ('Church Bells, not Muezzin', 2005 Viennese local elections), *Daham statt Islam* ('Home, not Islam', 2006 general election) and *Abendland in Christenhand* ('The West in the Hands of Christians', 2009 European parliament elections). These slogans were, moreover, accompanied by pictures of Christian and Islamic motifs. While the former were meant to symbolise the deficiencies caused by the political opponent, the latter were meant to refer to the patriotic position of the FPÖ.

Christianity and Islam have thus been used within the framework of the anti-immigrant agenda to signify the 'good us' in opposition to the 'evil them'. The anti-Islamic agenda has also been used by the party to underline its opposition to Turkey's entry into the European Union. A referendum launched by the party in 2006 on the question of Turkey's EU membership used the image of a woman wearing the European flag as a full veil. In relation to the question of whether Turkey (and its migrant community) belongs in Europe, the Freedom Party again made strong reference to Austria's historic past as a Christian bulwark against the Ottoman Empire. The perceived threat of a looming third Turkish siege, invoking the collective memory of the occupation of Vienna in 1529 and 1683 by the Ottoman Empire, became a central theme of the party's rhetoric.⁴⁸

Although the party on the one hand relies strongly on references to Austria's past, on the other it shares a common discursive repertoire with the

populist right in Europe. In particular, the theme of Islamic oppression of women, and the perceived threat of the imminent Islamisation of Europe, are common discursive concepts of the European populist right.⁴⁹ Sharing a mutual conception of the 'enemy', the anti-Islamic agenda has allowed many parties on Europe's populist right to strengthen transnational ties and foster an exchange of ideas. The political transnational platforms 'Cities against Islamisation' (founded in 2008) and 'Women against Islamisation' (founded in 2012), which were launched under the initiative of the Belgian Vlaams Belang, in close cooperation with the Austrian Freedom Party,⁵⁰ represent paradigmatic examples of this evolution. More recently, the FPÖ has used occasions such as the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attacks to make the argument (alongside its political allies in Europe), that Islamic radicalism constitutes a Europe-wide problem which demands Europe-wide solutions. It has therefore called for a revocation of the Schengen agreement.⁵¹

The anti-Islamic agenda is thus not restricted to domestic politics, and the FPÖ also pushes this agenda within the European Parliament (EP). A study of religion in the European Parliament⁵² showed that 70 per cent of all parliamentary questions relating to religion from Austrian members of parliament were asked by Freedomite deputies.⁵³ Almost all of the religiously related questions posed by the FPÖ in the EP concerned the issue of Islam.⁵⁴ The strengthened anti-Islamic agenda of the FPÖ under Strache was also accompanied by a shift in the party's position regarding certain 'European' immigrant groups. Ex-Yugoslavs, who had previously been viewed as a threat by the party, were suddenly no longer seen as a problem. In the 1990s, the FPÖ under Haider was still stigmatising immigrants from the former Yugoslavia as thieves.⁵⁵ However, immigrants from Serbia in particular began to be depicted in the official party rhetoric as integrated into Austrian society, on the grounds that they shared a common Christian, Western heritage.⁵⁶ In 2010, the FPÖ announced the establishment of the 'Christian Freedomite Platform for a Free Europe of Sovereign Peoples' (CFP), which was to be presided over by a Serbian immigrant. The organisation is meant to act as a support for Christians who are forced to leave their homelands.⁵⁷ In line with this self-presentation as advocate of persecuted Christians, in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis, the party has also repeatedly advocated that Austria should primarily grant Christian rather than Muslim refugees protection status.⁵⁸ During the European refugee crisis in 2015, the FPÖ repeatedly warned that the incoming Syrian refugees would further increase the threat of Islamic terror. It consequently renewed its calls for the reintroduction of border con-

trols at Austria's borders in order to protect the country from the Islamic State.⁵⁹ The strong anti-refugee position adopted by the FPÖ proved highly successful, given that the party gained 30.8 per cent of the votes in the 2015 local elections in Vienna.

In sum, from the mid-2000s onwards, the term 'Muslim' has, to some extent, replaced the term 'immigrant' in the party's rhetoric. It serves as a means to divide those who are supposedly Europeans, and hence can be part of the Austrian nation, and those who are not. 'Islam' functions as an empty signifier, ascribing a combination of naturalised cultural attributes to Muslims that have little to do with religious beliefs, or even being a believer.⁶⁰ The Austrian populist right is certainly not the only actor in Europe to have contributed to the 'othering' of Muslims, but it has done so in a more provocative and outspoken manner than many others. For example, in a seminar held in 2009 at the educational institute of the FPÖ, participants were taught that 'if cardinals are raping children, they do it despite their religion; Muslims rape children because of their religion.'⁶¹

The anti-Islamic agenda allowed the party to successfully address the various segments of the Austrian electorate characterised by one common denominator, namely a strong cultural identification with Christianity. Consistent with the Freedomite concept of religion, the majority of voters who can be successfully mobilised by the 'Christian', anti-Islamic agenda of the FPÖ see religion predominantly as equivalent to culture: according to Zulehner's findings, 40 per cent of Austrians belong to the category of 'militant cultural Christians' (*kämpferische Kulturchristen*).⁶² People belonging to this category vote mainly (but not exclusively) for the populist right.⁶³ These developments, in particular the strengthened transnational engagement and the incorporation of certain 'European immigrants' into the group conceived of as 'us' by the party, also highlight the fact that the party's focus on religion represents an expression of a post-national, Europeanised era. The preservation of national identity postulated by the populist right becomes entangled with the ongoing formation of a European identity. The FPÖ is not merely the self-appointed champion of Austrian patriotism: the religious framing allows the party to portray itself, in the same vein, as the defender of Europe.

Relations between the Church and the FPÖ

How has this new religious conception of identity promoted by the FPÖ affected relations between the party and the Christian Churches? As men-

tioned previously, when the FPÖ adopted its pro-religious programme in 1997, Churches were defined as the ideal partner to safeguard the Christian West. The Church's reaction to this new position was not entirely clear-cut. To be more precise, a division existed between those who reciprocated the party's approach and those who were more sceptical about the FPÖ's religious 'conversion'. This, of course, merely mirrors the internal heterogeneity of the Church, which represents a wide spectrum, from liberal to ultra-conservative. As Burchianti and Itcaina have pointed out, the Catholic Church is characterised by a certain tension between 'compassion for the excluded and a fear of the religious rival'.⁶⁴

The FPÖ has found some allies among ultra-conservative clerics. In particular, the Bishop of the Diocese of St Pölten, Kurt Krenn, backed the FPÖ on several occasions. In 1993, for instance, he arranged for Haider to have a private audience with the pope.⁶⁵ This certainly helped Haider to promote himself as a serious politician. After the 1999 general election, the bishop also openly supported the participation of the FPÖ in government. As he said: 'I hold Haider in high esteem. [...] If he can move things forward they should let him.'⁶⁶ Other representatives of the Church, however, have held a more negative attitude towards the party, interpreting the new rapprochement of the FPÖ as an abuse of religion. For example, in a rather explicit press statement responding to the endorsement of Christianity in the 1997 party manifesto, the Austrian Conference of Bishops declared that they did not want to be used in an instrumental way by the FPÖ.

The issue of migration has represented a continuing point of contention between Church representatives and the party. On the occasion of the 'Austria first' referendum, which was launched by the FPÖ in 1993 to demand that immigration be halted, the party was widely criticised by many high-ranking Austrian clerics.⁶⁷ The FPÖ's 1999 electoral campaign, which extensively used the notion of 'overforeignisation' (*Überfremdung*), raised new protests from Church representatives.⁶⁸ In response, Haider tried to depict the Church as a part of the establishment which had given up its mission to fight against social ills, while portraying the FPÖ as the only remaining true defender of the socially weak groups within Austrian society.⁶⁹ The FPÖ's rebuttal of criticism by the clergy thus mirrored that of the Northern League in Italy (see Chapter 2). Another of Haider's strategies was to use theological terminology in order to defend the party's anti-immigrant position. In a paper in which Haider explained the relationship of the FPÖ to the Christian Church, for example, he explicitly referred to a passage on the order of charity from the

text *Summa Theologica* by Thomas Aquinas.⁷⁰ In this paper, Haider also argued that Aquinas emphasised that we must love those nearest to us, including fellow citizens, more than strangers.

In the 2000s, the friction between the Church and the FPÖ increased still further. In particular, Strache's brandishing of a Christian cross in public in 2008 in order to protest against the construction of mosques met with disapproval from various Church representatives as an abuse of Christianity. Another disputed issue was the FPÖ's anti-Islamic slogan, 'The West in Christian hands,' which was used during the 2009 European Parliament election campaign. The slogan was condemned by several clerics, and also led to the issuing of a common press statement by the Ecumenical Church Council, an association of fourteen Christian Churches, which declared that it was opposed to any exploitation of the Christian faith during electoral campaigns.⁷¹ The conflict was sparked again during the 2013 general election campaign. The Freedom Party had chosen the slogan 'Love your neighbour,' to which it added the following phrase: 'For me these are our Austrians.' Church representatives criticised the limitation of this Christian commandment to Austrians.⁷² The conflict between the Church and the party also manifested itself in December 2012 when protesting refugees found shelter in a church in Vienna. In reaction to the Church's support for the refugees, the FPÖ placed an advertisement in a widely distributed free newspaper, accusing the Catholic Church of being 'delinquent' and supporting 'bogus asylum seekers.' It also claimed that new Church leadership was needed.⁷³ These divergent positions and conflicts between the Church and the FPÖ mostly related to immigration politics. Yet the party also made its disapproval of the Church known on other occasions. For instance, in 2009, in the wake of the European Court of Human Rights' decision in the *Lautsi v. Italy* case in favour of the removal of the Christian crucifix, the Freedomite deputy Werner Neubauer, a leading FPÖ politician, blamed the Church for supposedly not raising its voice on the matter, and called the Church, 'alongside neo-liberal elements of the EU', the 'coffin-nail' of 'Western, Christian ideas'.⁷⁴

Notwithstanding the above incidents and criticisms, it should be noted that the FPÖ has not challenged the hegemonic position of Christian Churches in Europe. Nor has it questioned the institutional arrangements from which the Church benefits.⁷⁵ Rather, the FPÖ has presented itself as the real guardian of Christianity. Or, put more bluntly, the FPÖ has claimed to be more Christian than the Church itself. Strache, like Haider before him, has consistently made use of religious terminology. For instance, he defended his widely

criticised use of the crucifix in 2009 with the argument that he had never misused it, but had instead employed it as a symbol of 'redemption and deliverance' in a cultural sense.⁷⁶ Although 'redemption' for the FPÖ has primarily meant 'redemption' from the cultural 'other' rather than redemption through the Holy Spirit, its position has indeed moved substantially closer to Christian dogmas on some critical ethical issues. In 2006, Strache initiated a debate on Austria's abortion law, proposing to restrict the time period during which abortions were legally permissible,⁷⁷ an initiative which was widely rejected by all other political parties, including the Christian Democratic People's Party. In the current 'Handbook of Freedomite Politics', the official guidebook for party officials, it is stated that, because of abortion, 'the female uterus [is] the place with the highest probability of death'.⁷⁸ In these guidelines the party proposes several measures to combat abortion, such as the introduction of official nationwide statistical documentation for abortion rates, and the establishment of a foundation for the protection of human life.⁷⁹ The party moreover explicitly condemns homosexual partnerships and the adoption of children by same-sex couples.⁸⁰

The ideological convergence with the Church on these issues is, however, at odds with the resurgence of an anti-clerical, German nationalist spectrum within the party leadership. When transforming the party into a modern populist force, Haider reduced the share of members of German national fraternities to 11 per cent.⁸¹ After the 2008 general election, however, more than a third of the thirty-four FPÖ deputies in national parliament belonged to these same duelling German national fraternities. Indeed, the most influential political and administrative posts within the party were occupied by fraternity members.⁸² The ideological dominance of anti-clerical German nationalists within the party is also reflected in the new party manifesto, which was adopted by the Strache-led FPÖ in 2011. In contrast to the 1997 manifesto, it contains no major references to Christianity. The only paragraph that mentions Christianity is to be found in the chapter on identity.⁸³ This chapter emphasises that the Freedom Party is committed to a 'European world-view' (*europäisches Weltbild*). This world view is defined as a 'cultural Christianity' (*Kultur-Christentum*) 'which is based upon the division of state and church'.⁸⁴ The manifesto, moreover, stresses the importance of negative religious freedom.⁸⁵ The weight of Christianity in the political programme was thus considerably weakened when compared to the previous manifesto adopted under Haider. Its significance is explicitly restricted to its function as a marker of cultural identity. Given these developments, it remains highly

questionable whether the party indeed ever went through a profound 'religious conversion' which would justify the argument that the FPÖ had truly incorporated religious beliefs and values.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at why the Austrian Freedom Party, a party which had traditionally been deeply committed to an anti-clerical agenda, endorsed Christianity at a time of drastic decline in the popularity of the Catholic Church. In order to make sense of this initially surprising development, several factors must be taken into account. Firstly, the 'religious conversion' happened during the transformation of the party from a German nationalist niche party into a populist force. One core feature of populist parties—and the FPÖ is a paradigmatic example of this—is to radically adapt their programmes in order to maximise voter appeal. The FPÖ in the early 1990s had come to realise that in a nation that had ceased to define itself as German, and had built up a strong national identity of its own, German nationalism was not the way to win over voters. The consequent detachment from German nationalism, and the simultaneous adoption of Austrian patriotism paved the way to change the party's position on religion. This invocation of Christianity served the FPÖ in strengthening its new self-image as a party of Austrian patriots. The new emphasis was not intended to signify belief—rather, it was intended to signify belonging to the Austrian nation.

Secondly, in times of increasing European integration, the endorsement of 'Christianity' as part of the party's new identity concept enabled its agenda to be linked to the emerging European identity. From the mid-2000s onwards, Christianity in the rhetoric of the FPÖ served as a demarcation line between those who supposedly 'belonged' in Europe and those who did not. The abstract notion of the 'Christian West' functioned as a bridge connecting Austrian identity to Europe. Thirdly, the new commitment to Christianity suited the FPÖ's anti-immigrant agenda extremely well. The construction of Islam, and consequently of Muslim immigrants, as potential threats to the country's Christian identity legitimised the Freedom Party's claims for restrictions to be placed on immigration. The new focus on Muslim immigrants, however, not only enabled the party to foster its anti-immigrant profile, but also facilitated the targeting of new groups of naturalised (ex-Yugoslav) immigrant voters, since they had come to be seen as 'one of us' by virtue of sharing the same religion.

The fact that Christianity was used predominantly in a culturally laden, exclusionary way also explains why the religious positioning of the party did not bring it any closer to the Catholic Church, but rather increased the friction between them. Apart from the ultra-conservative spectrum of the Church, the party was not able to convince the majority of Austrian clerics of its religious 'conversion'. The issue of migration, in particular, was a continuous source of disagreement between the two actors. In order to deflect criticism from the clergy, the party tried to denigrate the Church as a part of the establishment responsible for the demise of the 'West'. In that way, the party further accentuated its populist self-image as a party of 'true democrats', voicing popular opinion and grievances.

Having examined the 'religious conversion' of the Freedom Party, it can be concluded that the success of the Austrian populist right is certainly not due to a revival of religious belief in Austrian society, but rather to the existence and ongoing reaffirmation of boundaries within society. Closely intertwined with an anti-Muslim agenda, religion has served the FPÖ as a tool to exclude the 'other', and to distinguish itself from its political opponents. In sum, this chapter has shown that the inclusion of religion in the programme of the Freedom Party is to be understood as a populist mobilisation strategy rather than an indicator of adherence to a faith. Since the link with religion is not a core element of the Freedom Party's ideology, but more a vote-maximisation strategy, its relevance may change, and the party agenda may shift away from religion again at some point. However, taking into account the fact that 'Muslims have become desirably undesirable'⁸⁶—a sentiment which was successfully stirred up by the populist right and which has contributed to its electoral strength—it might be too presumptive to conclude that any such shift in agenda will happen in the near future.

