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

Caroline Berghammer and Desiree Krivanek

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Structure

... as in the draft version we sent around

(1) Introduction

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

(3) The Catholic church in Austria

(4) Data and methods

(5) Results

− Qualitative results: process of leaving the Catholic church

− Quantitative results: determinants of leaving the Catholic church

(6) Summary and conclusion

(1) Introduction

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

Background

–   1.5 million Catholics left the church in the last 50 years in Austria (1960-2010)

–   Leaving the church to become non-affiliated is the main driver of change in the share of Catholics (and neither religion-specific migration nor fertility) (Goujon et al. 2007)

Church tax

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

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

Research design

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

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

– "Classic" secularisation theory

Empirical studies on leaving the church:

– Dutch studies based on event-history analysis: determinants (Need and de Graaf 1996; Te Grotenhuis & Scheepers 2001)

– German study on a cohort of high-school students: role of church tax (Birkelbach 1999)

– Qualitative study from Germany: six trajectories of leaving the church (Ebertz et al. 2012)

– Austrian survey: irritations and gratifications (Zulehner 2011)

# Two further strands of research inform our analysis:

- **Studies on age and cohort effects:** religious decline seems to be concentrated in young adulthood – less so for church membership (Te Grotenhuis & Scheepers 2001; McClendon & Hackett 2012)

- **Definition of religious belonging:** faithful and nominalist members (Voas and Day 2007), national culture is very influential for whether someone indicates (not) to belong to a church (Knippenberg 1998; Hout and Fischer 2002)

What's missing and what's our contribution?

- **More comprehensive explanation than previous studies:** the panel structure of our data enables us to test a larger set of explanatory factors (than research that relied on retrospective information)

- **Model specification is theoretically grounded:** we base it on a qualitative model that we developed beforehand

- **Assess the relative strength of different factors:** differently from qualitative and non-representative quantitative studies

(3) The Catholic church in Austria

- Religious diversity increased, in particular in Vienna

- Large gap between regular practice and passage rites: 8% of the Austrian population attend church on Sundays, 60-70% use baptism, first communion, confirmation and a religious funeral

- Rate of leaving church high since 1980s with spikes
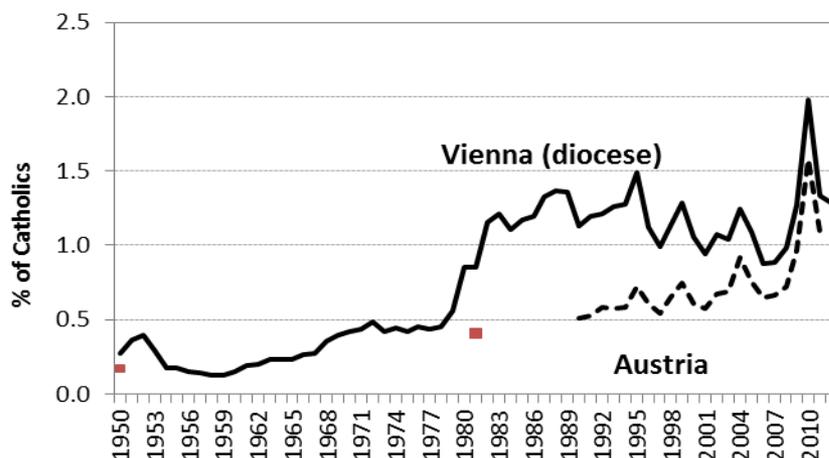
(4) Data and methods

- Mixed methods: qualitative, followed by quantitative

- **19 episodic interviews** with former Catholics
- Analysed using Grounded Theory to develop a model

- **Austrian Generations and Gender Surveys** 2008/09 and 2012/13 (panel)
- Respondents who were Catholic in the first wave and either Catholic or non-affiliated in the second: n=2,838 of which 188 persons (6.6%) left
- Logistic regression model

# Measurement of independent variables (at wave 1):

- **Religious socialisation:** Importance of religion in the parental home (1-3 not important, 4-5 important)

- **Religiosity:** self-assessed religiosity (1-4 low, 5-7 medium, 8-11 high)

- **Church attendance:** times per year (0 never, 1-11 yearly, 12+ monthly)

- **Passage rites:** importance of church wedding and funeral; count of very important, i.e. 4-5 on a 5-point scale; 0-1 not important, 2 important

- **Ethic:** nine family related attitudes; count of items with traditional answers, i.e. 4-5 on a 5-point scale; 0-1 modern, 2-3 medium, 4-9 traditional

- **Entry into the labour market** (yes/no)

- **Left the parental home** (yes/no)

- **Controls:** sex, age, education, region, country of birth
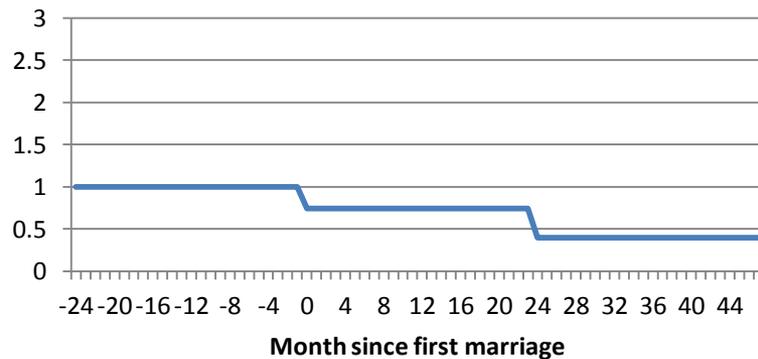
First attempt: event history analysis
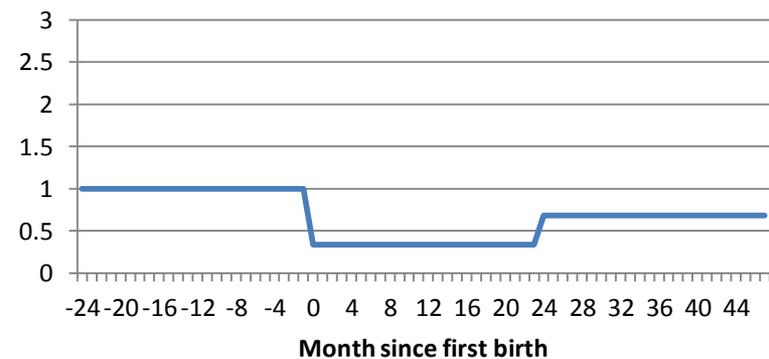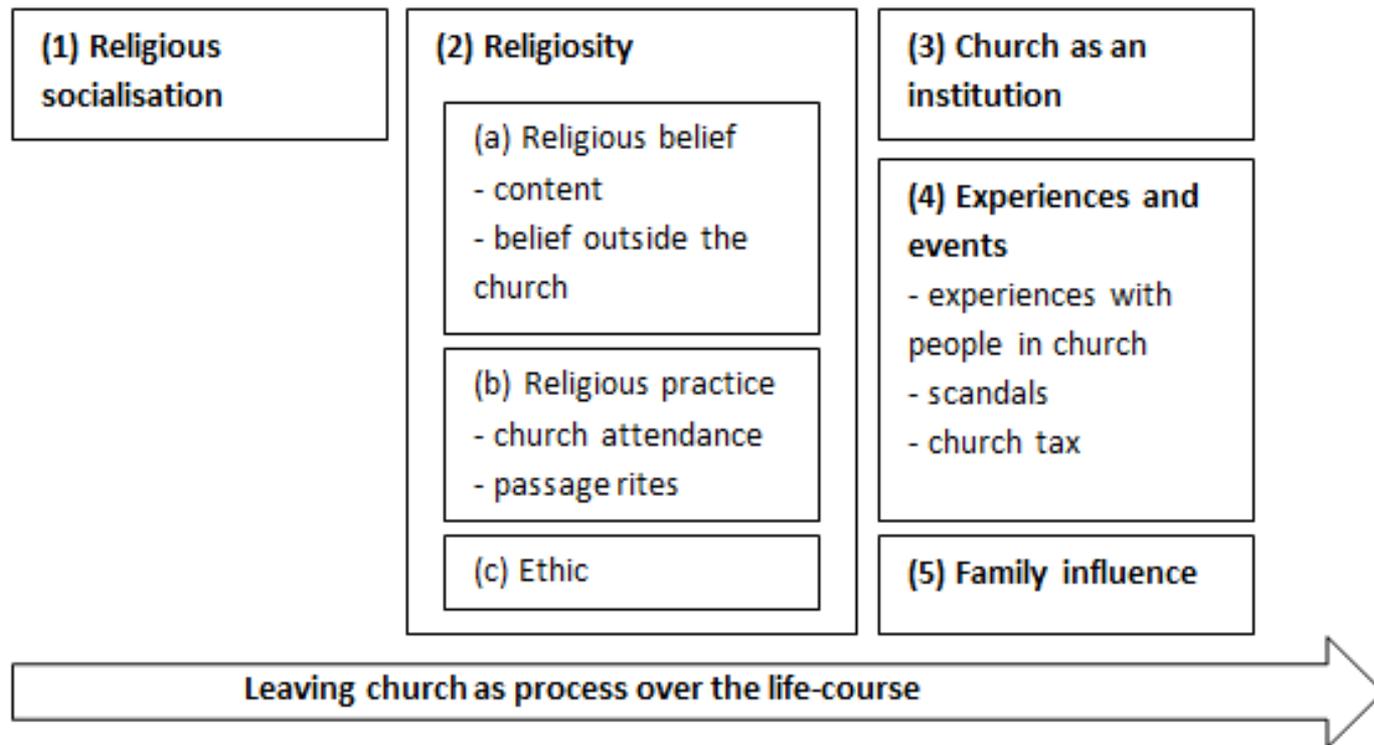
Left parental home

Month since leaving the parental home

Got first job
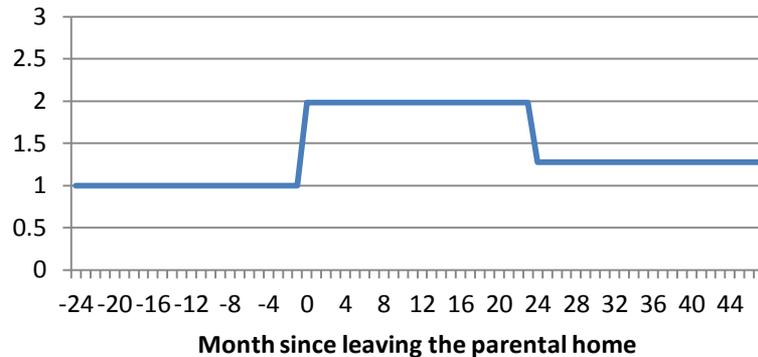
Month since taking a first job

First marriage
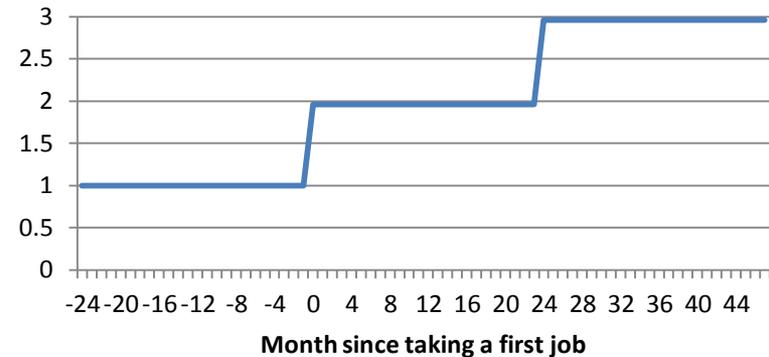
Month since first marriage

First child

Month since first birth

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

(1) Religious socialisation	(2) Religiosity	(3) Church as an institution
	(a) Religious belief - content - belief outside the church	(4) Experiences and events - experiences with people in church - scandals - church tax
	(b) Religious practice - church attendance - passage rites	
	(c) Ethic	(5) Family influence

Leaving church as process over the life-course →

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

(1) Religious socialisation

–   Strong, family-based religious socialisation: attended church service on Sundays, prayed in the family, were told religious stories

–   Weak, cultural religious socialisation: participated in religious education at school, celebrated Christmas and Easter in church

–   Strong religious socialisation → identification with the church, sense of belonging, more religious later in life although not always in a Catholic/Christian sense

(2) Religiosity

(a) Religious belief

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

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

(b) Religious practice

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

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

(c) Ethic

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

(3) Church as an institution

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

(4) Experiences and events

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

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

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

(5) Family and relatives

Parents' or grandparents' influence led to a postponement of leaving: *"In deference to my family I did not leave and only a couple of years later ... when I registered my principal residence in Vienna, then I left immediately."* (male, 45)
Little discussion with parents about this decision; sometimes joint decision with partner
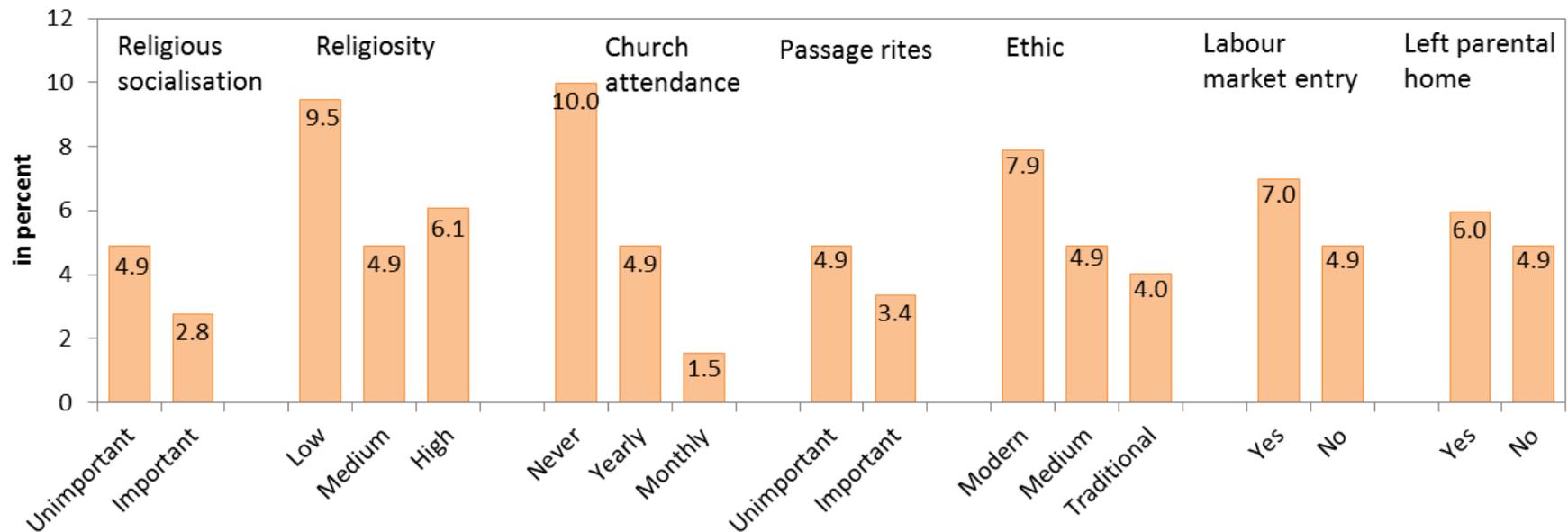
(5.2) Quantitative results: determinants of leaving the church
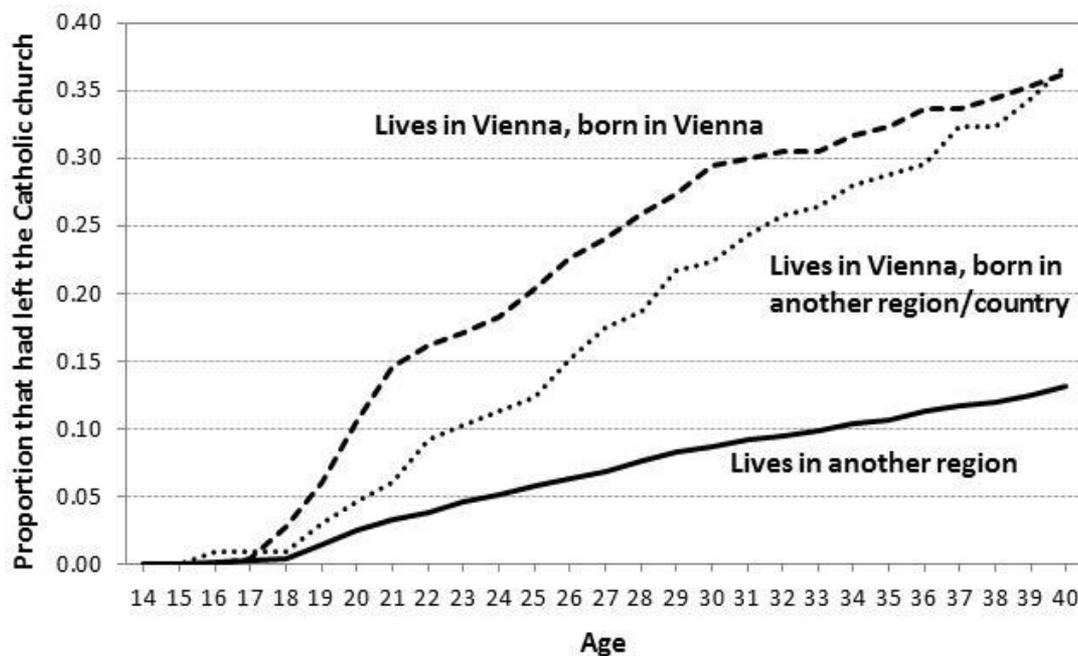
Source: Austrian Generations and Gender Survey 2012/13 (own computations)

Note: Survival curve, based on retrospective information

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

Source: Austrian Generations and Gender Surveys (own computations)

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

(6) Summary and conclusion

–   Leaving church needs to be understood as process over the life course, not as a single event

–   Marginal members leave the Catholic church (not disappointed core members)

–   Already medium religiosity, yearly church attendance and medium agreement with ethic lower the probability of leaving

–   Low religiosity is the key reason to leave, other factors are mostly triggers → conversion to Protestantism unlikely

- Religious socialisation and importance of passage rites yield independent significant effects

- Risk of leaving the church is highest in early adult age (particularly in Vienna)

What could the Catholic church do to keep its members?

– Concentrate on religious families, not on the return of marginal members

– Organise events (so people "get something for their money") and make passage rites as attractive as possible

– Be aware that marginal members have few contacts with church members, it's very important that these are not negative

Some questions for the discussion

– Could Vienna be better reflected? Is "Austria" in the title fine?

– Do you have any suggestions for the quantitative model?

Next steps …

- Prepare a poster presentation for EPC 2014 (P3-52)

- Improve the quantitative model: include interaction effects, use changes in independent variables

- Interpretation of results: distinction between reason and trigger (?)

- Finalize the draft and send it to a scientific journal