

Leaving the church

*Phenomenon, causes
and pastoral
consequences*



Very different interpretations

"Because more important than preventing people from leaving is to encourage people to join our places of worship. [...] In my opinion, this is an essential insight for answering the question of who the church is there for. It should be there for all those who seek meaning and orientation in Jesus Christ. It should make a strong offer to these people. There may not be that many of them in terms of numbers, but they can become true witnesses to the Gospel."

- Michael Maas (*Direktor des Freiburger Zentrums für Berufungspastoral*)

"It can't be that we within the Church don't care at all when an alarmingly high number of baptized Catholics go to the local court disappointed, frustrated or even angry to declare their withdrawal from the Church. These people must have something to say to us!"

- Generalvikar Klaus Pfeffer (*Vorwort der Essener Kirchnaustrittsstudie 2018*)

"A deeply regressive image, especially when it comes to their sexual morality, their treatment of remarried divorcees and homosexuals, can be responded to with a sense of proportion and courage in individual cases; but fundamental, structural developments are also necessary in order to further develop, among other things, dialog, pastoral care and church services in such a way that they honestly and mercifully do justice to people and their needs. At the same time, it is important to place the life-accompanying aspects of the Christian good news in the public eye in order to replace a one-sided fixation on the negative moral aspects with a balanced, realistic and therefore much more positive image."

- *Kirchnaustrittsstudie des Bistums Essen*

People leaving the church:

- Not representative of church members
- They see the church as having a rational purpose for certain individual functions, but without a non-functional, revealed, supernatural identity and mission
- Faith is less relevant to life
- Minimum of contact with church people and practices
- Correlation between personal images of God and trust in the church institution (Fig. 1)

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Abb 1: Gottesglaube und Kirchenvertrauen

2.2.1 Kirchenaustritt (Skript S.34)

Catholic positions are perceived as particularly "offensive" because they embody orders that go beyond respect for the self-determination of others.

"Reforms" within the church mean adjustments to the mainstream.

Religion as a proving ground for tolerance, the claim to absoluteness of the claim to revelation is at least virtually negated.

Catholics who have left or are willing to leave the church come to the fore (Fig. 2; Fig. 3).

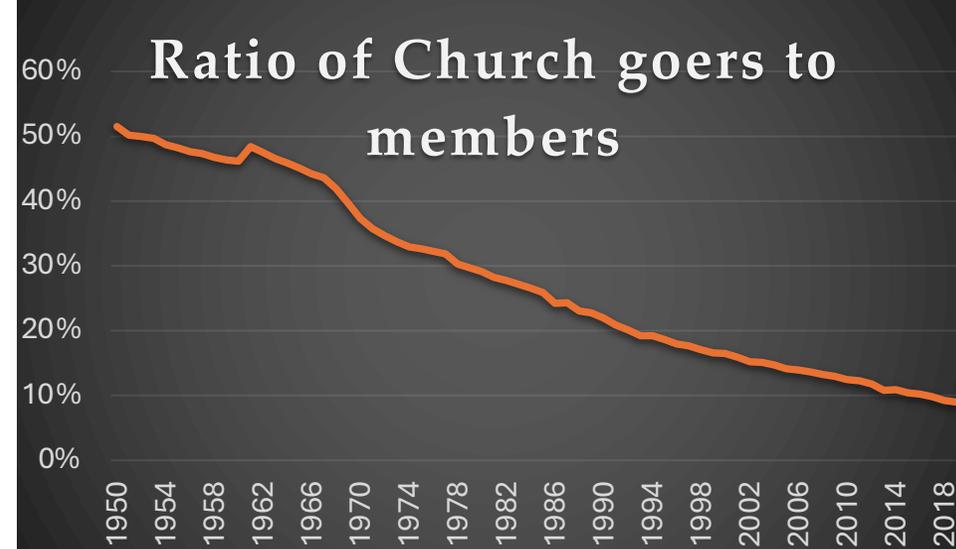


Abb 2

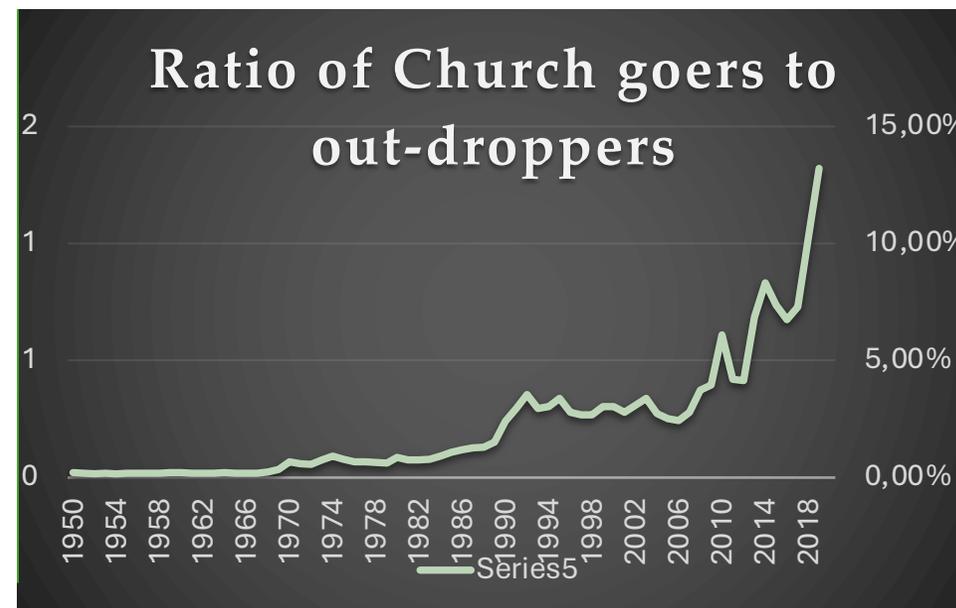
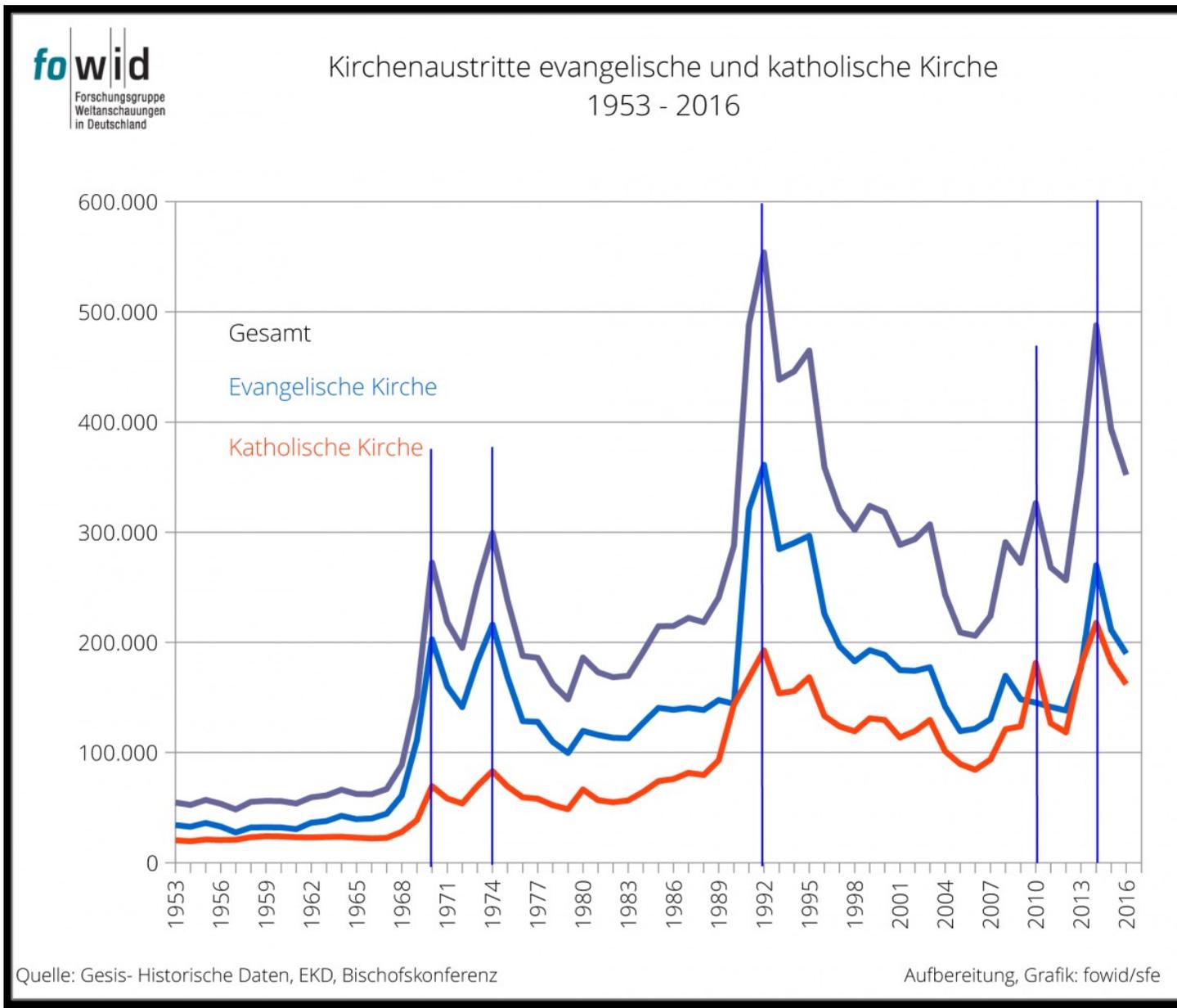
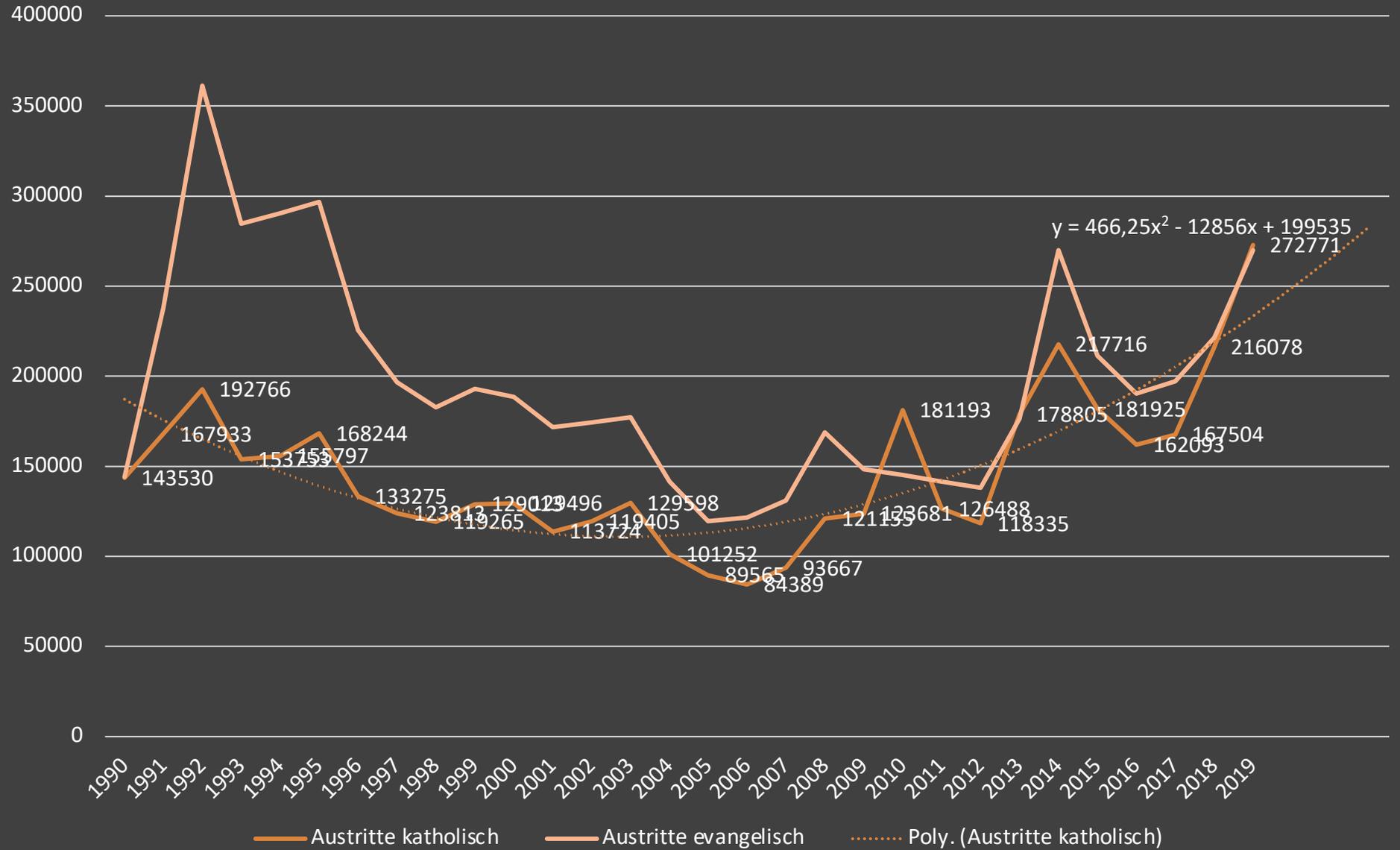


Abb 3

Waves of dropping out



Kirchenaustritte 1990-2019



Research on motivations

Newer Studies:

ESSENER KIRCHENAUSTRITTSSTUDIE VON 2018.

Economical motivations prevalent

SMALL STUDY CONDUCTED BY ULRICH RIEGEL ET AL. IN 2019:

"Data from current income tax statistics show that the proportion of church members in the overall population is lowest in those income classes that pay above-average church tax."

Career entry effect is well documented:

The first job triggers the biggest surge in resignations.

Interview study:

ÖSTERREICHISCHE INTERVIEWSTUDIE (2008-2012)

- "attached" vs. "distant leavers" - For the former, the church tax was the main reason for leaving, for the latter their religious alienation from the core teachings and practices of Christianity.

„If Vatican II is not the cause of Catholicism’s crisis, might it instead be the secret to its comparative success? Mass Exodus is the first serious historical and sociological study of Catholic lapsation and disaffiliation. Drawing on a wide range of theological, historical, and sociological sources.“

- STEPHEN BULLIVANT

2.2.1 Kirchengaustritt (Skript S.41-44)

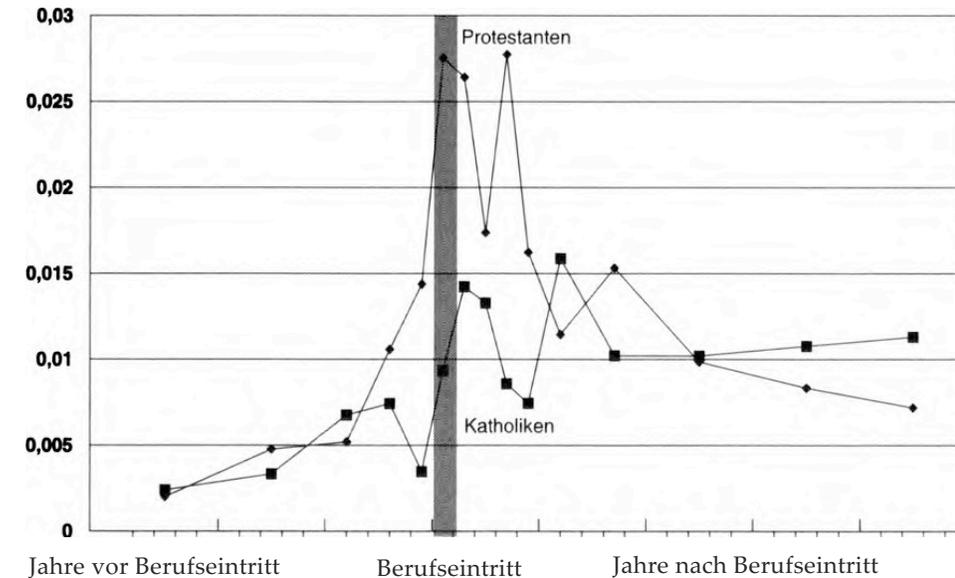


Abb 4

Dropping out and the relation to the Church

Results from „EKD-Mitgliedschaftsuntersuchungen“ and studies on religiosity:

- People define their affiliation with or distance from the church **independently of theological criteria**. Leaving the church also takes on an individual meaning, for example as disappointment, alienation, liberation, cooling off, reorientation or membership of another religious community.
- It is not uncommon for a **Christian background** to remain, and people show an interest in religion or even continue to see themselves as Christians, despite varying degrees of distance from the church.
- The **church-world difference** is almost always understood by those leaving to be to the detriment of the former and is linked to symbolic issues such as sexual morality, celibacy and the priesthood of women or catalyzed by high-profile events such as the appearance of a pope or scandals.
- The various places of the Church and its realization can be understood as a **failed attempt to resolve this tension** rather than as an actual apostasy from the Church.
- The various places of the church and ways in which it is practised are given significantly different evaluations: the large institution, mainly represented by the pope and bishops and present in the media; the parish and local area, with which there is contact at least through liturgies, but often intensive relationships have existed in a phase of life history or still continue; individual people, places and institutions of church life such as family members and pastors, monasteries, places of pilgrimage or charitable institutions, which receive special attention; finally, a cultural and/or biographical imprint through Christianity and corresponding religious convictions and value attitudes. **Leaving is usually preceded by longer processes of change at all levels**. It is rather rare for people to join another religious community after leaving.

Interpretation in the view of sociological theories

In terms of **individualization theory**, the change in values towards individualism and the dwindling involvement in loyalties to large institutions such as the churches are considered to be decisive.

In terms of **secularization theory**, the significance of religious interpretations of the world is declining in a long-term, globally observable development to the extent that competing interpretations predominate. Meaning and orientation in life no longer primarily require religious conviction and practice. As a result, church membership is also becoming dysfunctional and churches and religious communities are losing relevance.

Rational-Choice-theory: Leaving the church is seen as an individual cost-benefit decision: At a certain point, church membership is no longer worthwhile.

In terms of **role theory**, it is precisely this significance of the environment that can be captured using the "frames" approach already discussed by Birkelbach. According to this approach, individuals are largely bound in their decisions to certain typical courses of action ("frames").

Detailed causes of dropping out

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Riegel and Faix:

1. Biographical/socializing
2. Family, also denomination of parents
3. Religious education and attendance at a church school
4. Own religious practice and conviction (Fig 5)
5. Individual previous experience, especially with regard to religious services
6. Church tax
7. Sexual morality, scandals and negative image of the church
8. Member support and care

Abb 5

(Zusammenhang von Gottesbild und Vertrauen in die Kirche (Daten: ALLBUS 2018, eigene Berechnung))

Pastoral Consequences

1. Church tax

* Basic level of church tax is decidedly too high

* Stephan Haering's proposal: to enable personal dedication of church tax to a public legal entity of the church

2. "Prevention is better than cure"

* Attention! The church needs a clear and strong faith profile so that it does not become a needs-oriented service

3. The Church needs a strong, faithful, charismatic and missionary core of believers

- "Things are different here, things are better here", this should become a trademark
- Proclamation of faith and morals must therefore not be held back with little generally accepted teachings

4. Three characteristics of the Essen study:

Quality of pastoral care

Member management

Image cultivation

5. Reaching out to people on the margins of the church