**Religion and Politics in Modern Germany: Insights from the Waning Migrant Crisis**

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Many modern Germans—more than meet the eye—still embrace the faiths that underlaid the Holy Roman Empire and inspired Martin Luther. According to a May 2018 Pew Research Center study, “Being Christian in Western Europe,” nearly half of all Germans identify as Christian but do not actively practice the faith. Another 22 percent of Germans call themselves Christian and attend church regularly. Religiously unaffiliated Germans make up 24 percent of the population, and those belonging to another religion or declining to answer comprise just five percent.

I wanted to explore whether such widespread Christian identification, even in the cultural sense, impacts German society and national politics. When I posed this question in the fall of 2018, self-proclaimed Christians in Germany featured prominently in public debates on the extent to which asylum seekers should be welcomed to Germany and how they should fit in once admitted. For my McCloy Fellowship, I decided to examine German Catholic and Protestant responses to the waning European migrant crisis as a means of understanding these faith groups’ wider influence.

I set out to understand the story behind recent data. Pew had found that self-identified Christians share strikingly similar perspectives on spirituality with America’s “nones,” those who do not profess religious belief. Roughly equal (and small) proportions of American “nones” and German Christians believe in God with absolute certainty, pray daily, and say religion is very important in their lives. But even though Western European Christians exhibit relatively low levels of spirituality, their identification with Christianity is not merely nominal, Pew found. Self-identified German Christians are more likely than religiously unaffiliated citizens to demonstrate nationalist, anti-immigration, and anti-religious minority sentiment. In fact, *church-attending* Christians in Germany are second only to Austrian and Italian Christians in Western Europe on Pew’s scale that measures these characteristics.

But from the outset of my investigation, significant nuance among Germany’s self-identified Christians was evident. German churches were managing some of the country’s most important programs to aid migrants, but they also seemed to attract many people disgruntled with Germany’s migration policy. The ruling Christian Social Union (CSU) in Bavaria had recently mandated the display of crosses in government buildings throughout the region, but prominent clergy publicly rejected the move. The instrumentalization of Christianity by right-wing parties like the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and, increasingly, by more centrist parties like the CSU, was clearly striking a chord with some voters. I wondered, as the Pew study hypothesizes, whether some self-identified Christians were conveniently rediscovering their religious heritage as a means of establishing an exclusionary in-group.

This topic also seemed under-researched. I found that relatively few scholars or journalists had studied the religious dynamics of the migrant crisis. This seemed like an oversight, given the many religious organizations actively providing services to migrants, along with the use of Christian symbolism in political rhetoric and the arrival to Germany of many migrants of minority faiths.

Starting in Berlin and traveling south to Bavaria, I met with clergy and other church leaders, lawyers, NGO workers, migrants, politicians, theologians, scholars, journalists, and regular citizens. During my trip, I witnessed a partisan split between Germans who refer to themselves as Christians. The migrant crisis seemed to have both exacerbated this division and shined a light on it. A small but increasingly outspoken contingent sought to shield German “Christendom” from the influence of other cultures. Leaders of the major state churches and their affiliated social services organizations, meanwhile, appealed unfailingly to their perceived obligation to “welcome the stranger,” especially given the Church’s past complicity with the Third Reich. Both sides offered conflicting theological justifications, which had led to public debates on questions that are rare in Germany despite a widespread sense of Christian identity: Who are we, as a Church? As Christians? What, exactly, is the relationship between Christian faith and German national identity? I discovered new books, working groups, conferences, guides for churches, and public debates on the subject.

My qualitative approach of listening to the way different groups reasoned about faith and its role in the public square helped me understand the unique religious climate in which Germans find themselves. It gave me insight into how Christians from different walks of life and in different regions, as well as at different levels of involvement in religious communities, are thinking about important public policy issues. It also shed light on similar developments in the US, with evangelicals and other religious groups increasingly internally split over a range of public policy issues—immigration included.

Several Germans I met and interviewed are already asking these questions. Ulrich Schmiedel, for example, a theologian at the University of Edinburgh, describes a phenomenon of at least two different Christianities. Liane Bednarz, author of the popular 2018 book (in German) *The Fear Preachers: How right-wing Christians are undermining society and the churches*, traces the radicalization of some Christians in Germany through political mobilization by right-wing populists and radicals.

This report begins by explaining how German churches have engaged with migrants, revealing how firmly pro-migrant certain Christians have proved to be. It then looks at some of the deep-seated issues the migrant crisis has raised within the Church. Lastly, I discuss how the crisis has bared political differences between self-identified Christians, and the ways in which certain parties are instrumentalizing the faith. I draw on my own in-person interviews throughout and especially rely on the work of Schmiedel and Bednarz in the final section.

**Mobilizing for charity**

Germany has two official state churches: the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD)—a federation of 20 regional Protestant churches—and the Catholic Church. These bodies are well represented in the public sphere; collect billions of dollars annually through a century-old church tax, set at nine percent of income for church members earning above a threshold amount; and maintain extensive land holdings. The state churches’ faith-based charitable organizations, Diakonie and Caritas, have been deeply involved in the post-2015 migrant crisis response effort. Protestant churches outside the EKD structure are known as “free” churches and rely on members’ tithes. Besides their different sources of funding, there are important theological differences between them.

Before the migrant crisis reached its peak in 2015, migrant assistance programs were not prioritized in most churches, though German churches generally had a rich history of welcoming migrants, especially in the postwar years. In the early 2000s, some congregations were instrumental in helping a large group of Christian migrants from Russia integrate into German churches. Pastors occasionally took on “church asylum” cases to prevent deportations. Diakonie and Caritas advised migrants in the same way they do now, but on a smaller scale.

This status quo quickly changed in 2015. Churches were generally swept up in the public euphoria surrounding the arrival of refugees and soon realized their unique capacity to aid in the response. They were particularly well positioned to offer services that required personal interaction. Congregations launched language courses, internet cafes, and women’s groups, and helped new arrivals navigate bureaucratic processes. Diakonie and Caritas, meanwhile, undertook major hiring efforts to meet the growing need for skilled professionals in mental health services and legal assistance, for example. In 2014, Diakonie in Bavaria had 60 employees working on migration and integration, said Lisa Scholz, Diakonie Bavaria’s coordinator for migration and integration. By 2017, it had 350.

Activating such a massive response was no easy task. But there was widespread agreement, especially in the early days of the crisis, that supporting migrants was exactly the sort of activity churches should be spearheading. The disagreements and debates within religious communities came not over whether to respond, but *how* to do it best, said Sabine Dressler, the EKD’s Consultant for Human Rights, Migration and Integration.

The EKD, with its 20 regional churches and range of migration specialists, saw that the church’s infrastructure would be essential to the national response, said Dressler. The EKD had long contributed to migration and integration programs and debates in the German context, but it expanded its focus to the entire European situation, supporting civil rescue organizations like Sea-Watch and Mission Lifeline. The EKD continued to engage in high-level political discussions on the response. Matthew 25, a chapter of the Bible that includes a parable about feeding and clothing “the least of these,” served as the basis for its involvement, Dressler said.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELKB) in Bavaria, one of the EKD’s 20 regional churches, was uniquely positioned to help, with its higher-than-average church tax owing to Bavaria’s booming economy and an international border that many refugees were crossing. At the end of 2015, church officials set aside 23 million euro for parish-based projects aiding refugees, said Bettina Naumann, the ELKB’s coordinator for refugee projects. Other government funds soon supplemented these initiatives.

Church-hosted interreligious dialogue programs sprang up at the local level around Germany. These aimed to build understanding, influence perspectives on diverse communities, and help religious groups find common ground.

Denominational leadership exercised its political influence by supporting pro-migrant agendas. The Council of Christian Churches in Germany (ACK), which represents a range of denominations in Germany in addition to the state churches, published a statement on its policy of welcoming migrants. It began convening regional commissions on the asylum process monthly, where churches shared best practices. Many denominations belonging to ACK had already published statements and started similar initiatives within their own churches.

With funding from the Interior Ministry, ACK re-launched a lapsed program in 2016 called “Do You Know Who I Am?” The funding makes possible a range of nationwide programs centered on promoting interreligious understanding: school group visits to synagogues, churches, and mosques; church-sponsored language cafes for refugees; and community conversations between different religious groups, for example. The four Muslim groups involved in the project represent about 20 percent of Muslims in Germany, said Annika Foltin, project manager of the initiative.

Foltin recalled that before the migrant crisis, church was something Germans simply attended or didn’t—little more. It was rare to hear public conversations about it. But with migration in the news every day, and churches assuming such a significant role in the response, their voices quickly became more prominent in public debates.

**Grappling with questions of purpose and meaning: effects of the migrant crisis**

Growing pains over the course of a massive and sustained response were perhaps inevitable. Churches changed and adapted, often in uncomfortable ways, to the steady arrivals. “The Church realized that it cannot simply preach about Jesus in its comfort zone,” said Dressler, of the EKD. But in many ways, leveraging infrastructure and managing the response was the easy part for large institutions able to quickly tap into resources. The crisis exposed fault lines within the German Christian context—and arguably created new ones.

Some local churches welcomed change. Spectrum International Church in Duesseldorf, founded as a free church in 2013 with a diverse group of Asians, Africans, Eastern Europeans, Americans, and Germans, was possibly Germany’s first church with an intercultural pastoral team. With the arrival of many Muslim migrants in 2015, one of Spectrum’s founding pastors, Hans-Jürgen Scherpel, began volunteering in refugee camps and was soon regularly invited into the homes of local Muslims for traditional celebratory meals. In return, Muslims often attended Spectrum’s after-church brunches. Some came to see him as an *imam*, he said. They knew he took his faith seriously and respected him for that, he said.

Scherpel said some people in the church were skeptical about these activities—though most were supportive. Once, Scherpel was shocked to learn while accompanying a couple to their asylum interview that the husband had concealed his criminal background from the pastor and fellow parishioners. It made Scherpel more cautious, he said, but did not cause him to abandon his mission.

Though Spectrum is perhaps an outlier in the extent of its outreach activity, migrants across Germany started attending Christian services—often to the great surprise of German parishioners. According to Andreas Hantschel, a Frankfurt-based attorney who works with asylum seekers who have converted to Christianity, Germans who were used to seeing one or two new believers per year began seeing up to 100 per year, in the most extreme cases. Hantschel said that many migrants saw in Western culture not only a respect for freedom and democracy, but also a love of neighbor evident in the generosity of Christians. They believed churches were the root of that, he said.

Their arrival often served as a wakeup call. “I realized in the past few years,” Hantschel said, “that when Western culture is growing and blessed, and lives become comfortable, people tend to care about themselves—to choose engagement areas that represent the Church, but especially serve the local people and care for the needs of parishioners. This view is more inside the church than outside. This is changing, because now the people who became a bit sleepy and a bit hesitant to go out into the world realized the world has come to us.”

Migrants added to the diversity of churches and completely changed parish life in many cases, according to multiple people I interviewed. Germans were regularly surprised at the incredible sacrifices refugees had made, interviewees attested. “We have this [Christian] heritage,” Dressler said, “but this is a different world.”

Migration was less of a crisis than a blessing, agreed Christoph Stiba, Secretary General of the Union of Protestant Free Churches (EFG), and Thomas Klammt, the union’s consultant for integration and migration. Both Baptists, they count 20 migrant churches as full members of the denomination, largely owing to immigration in the 1990s. The denomination maintains a list of more than 200 affiliated groups, including many German Baptist churches, that have integrated migrants—mostly from Iran and Afghanistan. Migrants are enrolled in EFG training programs for ordination, and are quickly shoring up the denomination from the inside.

There was a widespread agreement among leaders I interviewed that churches’ assistance to migrants was not a one-way relationship. Bernd Densky, pastor and free church consultant for ACK, described a meeting in Bonn for the 2016 Common Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, an annual ACK project. Iranian converts at a church in Bonn hosted a prayer for Christian unity after serving dinner to attendees. Densky left with the strong impression that refugees weren’t merely taking resources from churches, but were in fact empowering them.

But deeper challenges often arose. There was debate in some churches about acceptable levels of missionary activity. Migrants of any religious affiliation could receive services, Klammt emphasized of Baptist programs. But some parishioners thought churches should go further by evangelizing, or at least explaining basic Christian beliefs, he said. Naumann, of the ELKB, said some critics of this kind of Christian outreach saw Islam as a fundamental part of the newcomers’ identities. They argued that Germans should respect asylum seekers’ religious traditions and be aware that any who converted, even of their own will, would be in danger if they were forced to return to home countries intolerant of non-Muslim faiths.

Even now, “it’s an open discussion,” Naumann said. “German churches think a lot about mission, but they’re not strong in this field.” She said a vocal minority within the ELKB regularly argues that the Church needs a strong missions movement. “Some people say this [migrant crisis] is a chance for the Christian community in Germany to invite people, to learn, and to grow again,” she said.

The migrant crisis has shed light on the uncomfortable fact that Germany’s churches are losing members. Naumann herself is pessimistic: “Growth is not possible, even if we invite every refugee in our Christian community to become a member, because we will soon be losing a generation whose membership in the Church is around 80 to 90 percent,” she said. She added that it takes so long to convert just one German who returns to the Church, and that financial pressures will increase as an older generation of parishioners retires and stops paying the church tax. She lamented that churches are one of the last places in Germany where rich and poor come together, as well as a very important place for shaping a common understanding of ethics and the meaning of life.

Naumann said it was jarring for some churches to observe the arrival of a strong Muslim community that knew what it believed. “We are facing Muslims that have a very strong and good understanding of their own religion,” she said. “But we have lost over the last 50 years a good deal of our own understanding of the Christian religion. We’re facing people who, for instance, show their religion by the way they dress. But we, including many baptized Germans, have lost or forgotten the roots of our own religion—most of us. So for us, it’s a confrontation. Theirs is a special religious world, and we’ve lost our own religious world.” She added: “But it’s not their fault that we are not strong. It’s ours.”

Multiple interviewees commented on the relative weakness of German churches brought to light by the arrival of new faiths. Hantschel summarized an oft-repeated perspective:

*“If you grow up in church you will not think about who you are, because you’ve grown up in it. Now, when 50 new people come with a different culture and a different religion and a totally false view of Christians, suddenly you have to explain to them who you are. And maybe for the first time you have to really think, because this person has no clue what you’re talking about. Before, there was no need to go so deep into it because people absorbed Christian beliefs from the culture. And in these moments, you have to ask: What are our core beliefs? What is in the heart of a Christian believer? What am I doing here? A Christian is someone who understands the work of Jesus—that he is rescued by grace and not works: You have to explain this to someone and think about what it means. You have to ask yourself: Is this the life I’m living?”*

Scherpel, of Spectrum International Church, said that the loss of Christian heritage in Germany was a consequence of the local church “not getting out there.” He grew up in Essen, a very Catholic area, and went to church because it was “good style—something people did.” But as he grew and began asking questions about the relevance of faith, he could not get satisfying answers. He recalls one leader explaining to a youth group how a car engine worked. He soon lost interest and turned to scientific explanations of life.

Naumann believes that a more robust Christian faith among Germans would actually help facilitate interreligious dialogue. “If I have a strong grasp of my own religion,” she said, “I can understand why a Muslim woman would like to show her faith through her clothes. I can criticize it, but I have an understanding. It’s as if I have, say, a cross from my grandmother. I can say of Islam, ‘I don’t like it because I see some cultural issues, some differences between men and women that I don’t agree with,’ but I have a basic understanding, and with this understanding I can go into dialogue.”

The arrival of migrants prompted debates on migration policy within congregations, even as the massive church-led response effort was ongoing. A minority was skeptical even from the start, recalls Klammt. Some churches and individuals distanced themselves from the denomination following the 2016 assembly, where migration and several other contentious issues were discussed.

There is an ongoing debate over whether Germany should be a Christian nation or a secular state, Klammt said. To him, the answer is clear for Baptists, a denomination once persecuted and therefore especially obliged to fight for religious freedom for all faiths, with none officially elevated over others. In his view, the Church must be on the side of the weak. He has personally seen scripture in a new light as migrants have arrived. He noted that on close reading, the Bible itself is a migration story. Unfortunately, Klammt said, many Baptists have not yet come to understand this context.

The initial euphoria of many in the Church and wider society alarmed him, because he knew that hard work, both practical and spiritual, lay ahead. He also recalled that German churches hadn’t always sought true integration in the past, so it would be important to formulate a better strategy this time. Russian Protestants and others had formed their own churches decades earlier, unwelcomed as they were in many German congregations. And many who entered Germany under the guest worker program, for example, remain in segregated neighborhoods, often with limited German language skills, to this day.

Church infrastructure may have been flexible and well funded enough to expand to meet migrants’ needs, but congregations themselves often confronted profound internal dilemmas. Many of them, along with self-identified non-practicing Christians who sensed their heritage was in jeopardy, were primed to consider the messages of radical right-wing political parties.

**Pockets succumbing to right-wing populism: The Church’s new struggle**

Most church leaders I interviewed minimized the presence of radical right-wing thinking within churches. Indeed, the ideology is relatively small. An April 2018 poll by the Allensbach Institute found that three to four percent of church-attending Christians in Germany support the AfD, compared to 16 percent of non-practicing Christians and 23 percent of non-Christians. Many more self-identified Christians outside the Church than within it seem vulnerable, which helps explain why many leaders haven’t seen its effects.

A few years ago, right wing populism and its more radical manifestations was a nonissue, said Naumann, of the ELKB. In 2010 Naumann organized, in cooperation with the Catholic Church of Germany, a nationwide “Church Day,” called *Kirchentag*—a festival that attracts more than 100,000 participants for debate and fellowship. She said one focus in 2010 was on the problem of abuse by Catholic clergy, teachers in Protestant schools, and other religious officials. “In Munich,” where the festival was held, she said, “no one had the feeling that we had a big right-wing problem—not in the society, and not in the Church. Nobody. If the problem had been apparent then, we would not have had such a warm welcome [for refugees] in 2015. Nobody sensed there would be such a change in our society.”

As the crisis wore on and Germans began to feel the burdens of hospitality, Foltin said that overt racism became evident within certain corners of the Church. In turn, church leaders began to take seriously their obligation to stand against extreme right-wing ideologies that promote racist thinking. Prominent clergy issued pro-migrant statements and lobbied officials to adopt pro-migrant policies.

Increasingly, church leaders parted ways with public officials sensitive to shifting public opinion, especially in traditionally conservative Bavaria. Markus Kraft, head of asylum counseling services at a Caritas office in Bavaria, said the current division is the starkest he can recall. Churches typically fulfilled a welcome advisory role in the state. The relationship also worked the other way: Bavarian Premier Markus Soeder, for instance, formerly served as a member of the state synod. But Soeder’s decision to hang crosses in public buildings as strictly cultural symbols—a political move to compete with the AfD for key votes ahead of an election—exposed a rift between church and state.

Mirjam Elsel, an ELKB pastor in Bavaria and local coordinator for refugee services, broke with leading Bavarian politicians when she started organizing weekly vigils to protest the treatment of asylum seekers housed on a local former military base. She also began assisting nearby parishes with church asylum cases, a once-settled issue that has now grown contentious.

Elsel and others said the Church’s political activism brought some Germans back to church. “There is a lot of solidarity surrounding migrants,” she said. “There are new reasons to be Christian in this country. Until recently nobody really asked what it meant to be a Christian. But there is new life now in parishes.” Dressler agreed. Some native Germans who once left the church have returned for Sunday services, she said, owing to their new perceptions that the Church is doing something tangible and good. A Church widely criticized for abuse by Catholic priests had given way to an institution with a worthwhile mission, many agreed.

But church leadership’s seemingly left-wing political activism on migrant-related issues has apparently caused a small segment of self-identified Christians to move further to the right. Right-wing parties that surged in popularity during the last election have made a concerted effort to advance the idea that Germany’s “Christian” heritage—often meant as a cultural identity rather than a religious one—is under threat from foreigners.

Debates over the meaning of *heimat*, a term with no clear equivalent in English, but roughly meaning “homeland,” have arisen among some groups of self-identified Christians. Some see the Christian faith itself as *heimat*—a spiritual “home” distinct from national identity. German *heimat*, in this view, is not by necessity Christian. Others equate *heimat* with the idea of an explicitly Christian nation.

Anette Schultner, a former member of the AfD, found herself at the heart of debates over migration and the idea of a Christian nation when she launched the group Christians in the AfD (ChAfD). Schultner had formerly participated in the Evangelical Working Group (EAK), the official Christian Democratic Union (CDU) Christian group, but she left the party for the CSU, and then the AfD, when the CDU shifted to the left. She hoped the ChAfD would help “stabilize” what she saw as a promising new party of conservatives while promoting policies that, in her mind, aligned with and helped preserve Germany’s Christian heritage.

Schultner said that religiously speaking, the AfD was composed of strange bedfellows: Party leaders tended to be either atheists or devout, churchgoing Christians—a unique partnership, given that most of German society consists of Christians for whom the “Christian” label carries little religious meaning.

On migration, Schultner mirrored the views of parishioners disappointed with church leaders’ seemingly left-wing activism. She wanted protection from Muslim extremists for Christian refugees in Germany, as well as priority for Christians seeking asylum. She thought churches should prioritize Christian evangelism in their work with migrants. And she said church leaders focused too much on meeting non-spiritual needs.

Schultner speculated that for the money spent on refugees, Germany could assist many more people in their countries of origin—young men, for example, who could be contributing to the growth of their countries instead of wasting away in refugee camps. She claimed the state has spent large sums on refugees while neglecting to support vulnerable groups of native Germans, like the elderly. “Is that Christian?” Schultner asked. She also argued that allowing un-vetted asylum seekers to stay in Germany and threaten the German population runs counter to the Christian faith. She said the oft-cited biblical command to “welcome the stranger” does not mean welcoming people prone to criminality or terrorism.

Eventually, however, extremist elements within the AfD compelled Schultner to leave the party in August 2017. She had been shocked by a Nazi-like comment made by a party leader, as well as other extreme statements.

German media has often blurred the line between rational critiques of migration policy and overt racism, which now characterizes the AfD. There are undoubtedly many self-identified German Christians in the former camp, as well as many Christian supporters of increased immigration—but there are also many in the latter camp. For this latter group, *heimat* is not primarily a nation built on Christian values, but rather a nation of white Europeans who share a Christian heritage.

A group that consistently and brazenly promotes this idea is PEGIDA. Ironically, church attendance is low where PEGIDA is strongest, in East Germany. According to Naumann, who grew up and attended seminary in the East German state of Saxony, “East Germans who sympathize with the AfD or PEGIDA are trying to defend a tradition that is no longer their own. When you take East Germans without any known Christian heritage to church, they will find it interesting, but sometimes they won’t even know what the cross means.” To PEGIDA, she said, the cross represents German culture and its history of opposition to Islam more than the Christian gospel and values. Many East Germans have probably never interacted with a Muslim, she speculated. The picture is different in much of West Germany, Naumann said, where the majority is still connected to the Church through marriages, baptisms, and funerals, and where interreligious interaction is more common—if declining.

To be sure, there are economic grievances at play, Naumann added, explaining that East Germans have felt left behind since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The relative attention migrants received created fertile ground for right-wing ideas, she said. But for East German Christians who support PEGIDA, the roots of racism aren’t exclusively economic. The Church can be part of the problem, owing largely to East German churches’ history of unified protectionism against external threats. Naumann said:

*“During the GDR [German Democratic Republic] time, when I studied theology, it was seen as very important to stand together as students because our secret service was trying to destroy us, through blackmail or pressure. The East German Church brought theologians and pastors together in solidarity. It brought the Christian community together, but it was a closed community. And after the collapse of the [Berlin] wall, it was difficult for some to reopen this Church and have a dialogue with outsiders. The closeness was a source of power during the GDR time, but it’s now the biggest point of weakness. To fight against the right-wing movement means to live and stand for an open society and an open church.”*

Liane Bednarz, a Hamburg-based attorney and journalist, documented the rightward drift of self-identified Christians across Germany in her book *The Fear Preachers*, which examines “the point where conservatism ends and right-wing populism begins.” She argues that Christians of the “moderate new right” and an increasingly prominent “radical right” are often drawn to seemingly orthodox Christian positions that are actually quite radical. After these Christians begin to support a party on a certain issue, they often open themselves to more radical versions of it. For example, Bednarz said, many orthodox Christians are understandably drawn to parties that speak out against abortion. But through repeated exposure to rhetoric about national superiority, some fall prey to the radical position that German births should outpace minority births in the interest of preserving ethnic German dominance.

The right-wing strategy, Bednarz argues, is to sow fear. Right-wing parties take on characteristics of cults that little resemble orthodox faith. They often interpret isolated passages of the Bible independent of the entire biblical narrative. She said many German pastors had reached out to her to express their sense of helplessness in the face of parishioners’ susceptibility to rhetoric that predisposed them to resent migrants.

Bednarz noted that many self-identified Christians steer clear of right-wing indoctrination; she is a Christian and a political conservative herself. The populist and radical Christians Bednarz studied are relatively small in number, but they form a politically active segment of German society. They find allies in PEGIDA and the AfD, but also occasionally in the CSU, a traditionally moderate conservative party aiming to co-opt voters vulnerable to right-wing ideology. Bednarz said the German Christian media largely ignored her book, even though major mainstream outlets in Germany reviewed it—perhaps a sign of how difficult it is to pin down a cohesive “Christian” perspective.

Ulrich Schmiedel, a theologian and migration expert at the University of Edinburgh, said that many Germans leveraging Christian arguments against migrants probably would not self-identify as Christians in the religious sense—though they would see the faith as part of their cultural identity. “Instead of saying there’s a rift *within* Christianity,” he explained, “you could in a way say there are at least two Christianities. You have very mixed constituencies, within the churches and outside the churches. There are many people laying claim to Christianity or to the Christian heritage, and using that heritage for very different purposes. But whether this is Christianity or not probably depends on who you’re asking.”

Though the Christian label is fraught, Schmiedel has seen the two constituencies crystallize over the course of the crisis, with one side regularly construing Christianity as a cultural bulwark against Islam. “And that may be one of the reasons for the renewed interest in Christianity in the AfD, in PEGIDA,” Schmiedel said:

*“They’ve recognized that Christianity can actually be used against Islam. So it’s become sort of an identity marker in many cases. It’s more about belonging than believing. And the faith itself is not necessarily the most important thing. The important thing for them is the identity of Europe that Christianity signifies. Whether you believe or not doesn’t matter so much. It’s whether you belong here or not. And that can be found out by what you think about Christianity.”*

The other constituency, according to Schmiedel—a group he calls the “believers,” in contrast to “belongers”—maintains that Christianity makes an important contribution to public life in Germany, but that other faiths are free to do the same.

Different theological interpretations on the migration issue are certainly possible, Schmiedel said. But he went on:

*“If you judge the biblical scriptures as a whole, I think it would be very hard to make an argument saying that we should keep [migrants] out. I don’t think if you look at the biblical stories we are justified in keeping foreigners out. I think you can pick out individual bits to make this case, but the scriptures overall—that would be very tough. I also think our theological tradition overall would make it very tough to make that case.”*

The migrant crisis has confirmed that Christians in Germany cannot be classified in a straightforward way, whether in terms of practice, confession, politics, or region. But it has also made clear that there exist two main camps—“believers,” who value biblical hospitality, and “belongers,” who prioritize the preservation of a Christian cultural identity—with many others exhibiting a combination of the two. The crisis has also pushed some “belongers” to the right, and through a strategy of “fear preaching”—as Bednarz argues—has undoubtedly drawn more into their camp. With 71 percent of Germans self-identifying as Christians, according to Pew, and the growing popularity of parties that instrumentalize the faith, these categories are politically consequential.

But the crisis also reveals a good deal about the state of the German Church, whose pro-migrant activism has enriched the lives of countless migrants but done little to address deep-seated issues keeping attendance low. Church leaders have the ear of elected officials, but often struggle to reach their own parishioners. Several churches I encountered—“free churches” that appeal to migrants, in particular—are thriving, but most were relatively empty on Sundays and at programs throughout the week.

Traditional churches have lost their ability to influence most Germans, while a version of Christianity based on vague principles or ethnic heritage—in other words, open to interpretation—persists. Naumann contemplated, “You go to churches and monasteries-turned-museums in France and think, ‘What is it for?’” She speculates that Germans will soon be asking the same question.

The commingling of self-identified Christians and right-wing politics in Germany bears resemblance to the alliance between a majority of white evangelicals and the Republican Party in the United States. Many evangelicals have been willing to brush aside exclusionary rhetoric of self-identified Christian leaders in pursuit of a “Christian nation” ideal. A key theme in both countries is that cultural influencers—the media, politicians, and so forth—often have a stronger hold on self-identified Christians than pastors and church leaders do. These sources haphazardly wield Christian truisms in a way that appeals to those (on the political left and right) with partial knowledge of the faith’s tenets and sows fear, as Bednarz argues.

The political takeaway is less clear than many would probably hope: German and American Christians—those repelled by the “Christendom” mindset and those drawn to it—are politically “up for grabs,” with the political center rapidly disappearing in both countries. The political shuffling of both countries’ Christian majorities will undoubtedly continue, as people come to their own conclusions about what Christianity means, if anything, for migration policy and other key issues. Many will reach their conclusions apart from religious community or teaching. For all the admirable ways church leaders in Germany serve migrants, their perspectives are struggling to compete with political rhetoric that elevates religious nationalism above the tenets of the faith.