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**Citation for published version:**

Schmiedel, U 2023, 'Normalization? German theologians respond to the rise of the far right', *Reviews in Religion and Theology*, vol. 30, no. 1-2, pp. 18-24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rirot.14192>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1111/rirot.14192](https://doi.org/10.1111/rirot.14192)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

Reviews in Religion and Theology

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## REVIEW ARTICLE

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# Normalization? German Theologians Respond to the Rise of the Far Right

*Ulrich Schmiedel*

**Christentum von Rechts: Theologische Erkundungen und Kritik [Right-wing Christianity: Theological Explorations and Critique]**, Johann Hinrich Claussen, Martin Fritz, Andreas Kubik, Rochus Leonhardt, and Arnulf von Scheliha, Mohr Siebeck, 2021 (ISBN 978-3-16-160005-0), vi + 234 pp., pb €26.95

**Rechte Normalisierung und politische Theologie. Eine Standortbestimmung [Right-wing Normalization and Political Theology: Defining a Standpoint]**, Jan Niklas Collet, Julia Lis, and Gregor Taxacher (eds), Pustet, 2021 (ISBN 978-3-7917-3287-9) 280 pp., pb €25.19

### *Abstract*

*The far right is on the rise across Europe. In Germany, the political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has had striking success in several elections, establishing itself in parliaments across the country. Although Christianity comes up in the programmes and the politics of this party, theologians in Germany have been hesitant to engage the rise of the far right. In this review, I present two publications that put an end to this hesitation. Although I cannot cover each and every chapter, I aim to showcase the key concerns and the key concepts of both publications in order to stress the contrast between them. Both theologically and politically, the stakes are high. The question of how to respond to the rise of the far right, I suggest, cuts to the core of the conceptualization of the identity of Christianity.*

**Key Words:** far right, Islamophobia, racism, public theology, political theology, theological ethics, Germany

The far right is on the rise. Islamophobia—a racism that targets Muslimness or perceived Muslimness—connects far-right politicians and far-right protesters across Europe. The concept of the ‘new right’ was coined to capture the shift from color-coded racism, often revolving

around categories of race, to culture-coded racism, often revolving around categories of religion. It is a shift that is crucial to the far right's Islamophobia. In Germany, the political party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) is commonly considered 'new right'.<sup>1</sup> It has had striking success in several elections, establishing itself in parliaments across the country, including the Bundestag in Berlin. Christianity comes up in the programmes and the politics of the AfD, often perceived through the prism of a clash of cultures. Theologians in Germany have been hesitant to engage the rise of the so-called new right. Yet the two publications under review here put an end to this hesitation.

Given the denominational organization of theology in German universities, it comes as no surprise that one publication mainly features contributions by Protestants, while the other publication mainly features contributions by Catholics, with only very little debate across the denominational divide. In my review, I aim to offer a short survey of both. Although I cannot cover each and every chapter, I aim to showcase the key concerns and the key concepts of both publications in order to stress the contrast between them. Both theologically and politically, the stakes are high. The question of how to respond to the rise of the far right, I suggest, cuts to the core of the conceptualization of the identity of Christianity.

**Christentum von Rechts: Theologische Erkundungen und Kritik [Right-Wing-Christianity: Theological Explorations and Critique],** Johann Hinrich Claussen, Martin Fritz, Andreas Kubik, Rochus Leonhardt, and Arnulf von Scheliha, Mohr Siebeck, 2021.

This collection, featuring mainly Protestant authors, aims at a 'de-demonization of the new right in order to enable engagement with it in a proper way' (p. 4). Martin Fritz opens this engagement with a thorough analysis of the understanding(s) of Christianity characteristic of the new right that positions itself in opposition to two perceived threats: the elimination of Christianity and the expansion of Islam in Europe—which is to say, Europe's 'Islamization'. According to Fritz, Christianity is crucial in Alain de Benoist's concept of ethnopluralism that marks the ideology of the new right. Fritz contends that the new right's desire to connect religion to nation (alism) might be disconcerting for many. Yet 'it should not be (dis)qualified as "right wing" or "radical right wing" from the outset, as it has roots in 'classic' Christian conservatism' (p. 59). For Fritz, then, the Christianity of the new right is 'Christian conservatism in culture-clash mode' (p. 54). He concludes with a call for calm and collected dialogue. The chapters that follow take up this call.

From liturgical and homiletical angles, Andreas Kubik explores a vigil that new-right protesters and new-right politicians held after a terror

<sup>1</sup>Throughout, all translations from the German are my own.

attack in Berlin. Kubik points out that the critique of the politicization of the church that runs through so much of the propaganda of the new right can be turned against itself. The vigil demonstrates that there is a politicization of church both on the political left and on the political right. Kubik argues that new-right vigils such as the one in Berlin are expressions of contemporary practices of Christianity, practices that can no longer be controlled by churches. On the contrary, the vigil points to a 'representation gap' (p. 84) within churches. Theologically, any response to the new right must therefore draw a distinction between political and pastoral demands. Pastorally, openness to Christians who find resonance with the ideas and ideologies of the new right is vital.

The next two chapters engage these ideas and ideologies. Johann Hinrich Clausen explores the thought of Karlheinz Weißmann, one of the public intellectuals of the new right in Germany. Arnulf von Scheliha compares the category of the people as it has been conceptualized by the intellectuals of the political right in the 1920s and in the 2020s. The difference, he argues, is the significance that conservative theologians like Emmanuel Hirsch, Paul Althaus, and Friedrich Gogarten attributed to conscience. The conscience of a person cannot be controlled by any category of order, such as 'the people', because it constitutes subjectivity by transcending these categories. Countering the references of today's new right to the intellectuals of the 1920s, von Scheliha points to the significance of the recognition of the subject for the understanding of the state in liberal political theory and theology.

In the fifth and final chapter, Rochus Leonhardt returns to the current challenge of the rise of the new right. He contends that the AfD is a challenge for democracy, yet a challenge that must be tackled through its integration into democratic deliberation. 'The church', he argues with reference to Reiner Anselm, the chair of the Chamber for Public Responsibility of the German Protestant Church, 'has to account again and again for 'whether its conduct contributes to participative democracy'. This includes the self-critical question of whether it has limited the spectrum of political opinions that can be considered tolerable' (p. 186). Leonhardt assumes that the 'friend/foe dualism' that runs through both the new right and the critics of the new right is the 'actual danger' for democracy in Germany (p. 189, original emphasis). He thus spells out the theoretical and practical consequences of the de-demonization of the new right that this compilation calls for—sober inclusion rather than sententious exclusion of the AfD 'for the sake of argumentations about the matters at hand (*Sachauseinandersetzung*)' (p. 176).

Throughout, this compilation features careful analyses and clear arguments. There is little engagement with the international debate on the far right in political theory and theology, but German primary and secondary literature is engaged thoroughly. It is striking that questions of gender—a category that is crucial for the politics of the far right,

particularly its traditionalist family policy proposals—are not covered in any depth or detail. Perhaps once can trace this lack of coverage to the fact that all authors of this compilation are male. The compilation marks a significant point of departure for theological engagements with the rise of the far right in Germany. Its assumptions and arguments, however, are by no means beyond criticism, as the next compilation makes clear.

**Rechte Normalisierung und politische Theologie. Eine Standortbestimmung [Right Normalisation and Political Theology: Defining a Standpoint]**, Jan Niklas Collet, Julia Lis, and Gregor Taxacher (eds), Pustet, 2021.

This edited volume, featuring mainly Catholic authors, moves from sociological to theological perspectives on the new right in Parts 1 and 2 to a reflection on the practices of churches in Part 3. It takes the ‘normalization’ of the new right as a challenge for political theology. By ‘normalization’ Jan-Hendrik Herbst ‘means that right-wing positions become more and more persuasive in society’ (p. 18). He explains the concept of normalization in the first chapter, emphasizing that political theologies that follow Johann Baptist Metz are a tool to counter it. The assumption that the normalization of the far right is a challenge that ought to be resisted by political theologians both inside and outside churches runs through the entire compilation.

The sociological contributions of the compilation contextualize and characterize the intra- and the extra-parliamentary new right in Germany. Floris Biskamp covers the history of the AfD. He suggests that it ‘has become more and more absurd to refer to ‘moderates’ within this party ... Following the common criteria of international research on political parties, all relevant forces within the party have to be classified as far-right ... The content-driven conflicts within the party can only be interpreted as conflicts between a camp of right-wing radicalism ... and a camp of right-wing extremism’ (p. 53). The following interview with Thomas Wagner, who has been in conversation with public figures of the German new right, asks and answers the question of how these figures ought to be engaged. Both inclusion and exclusion in the confrontation with the new right can increase its popularity. Wagner advocates for a long-term strategy of discursive and democratic engagement in order to disprove the new right’s propaganda. The following chapters contextualize the new right that organizes itself in the AfD politically and psychologically. Daniel Keil points to recent political dates. Sonja Strube points to recurring psychological dynamics. Stressing the significance of the new right’s ‘anti-gender activism’ (p. 110), she argues that there are positions and practices in churches that promote the ‘authoritarian personality’ (p. 101) that scholars such as Theodor W. Adorno have studied. According to Strube, here lies one of the central ecclesial catalysts for the new right.

The theological contributions of the compilation are less about examining and more about engaging the new right. Jan Niklas Collet and Fana Schiefen clarify that such engagement cannot be neutral. Political theology à la Metz is rooted in the 'authority of the suffering' (p. 127). It is this authority that calls theologians to counter the normalization of the new right. Ulrich Engel presents the 'kingdom of God' as a core concept for political practice. Through a combination of political theology and post-structural theory, he highlights the openness of this concept. It is an eschatological category that draws on negative rather than positive theological engagement. According to Engel, practice is what makes the kingdom of God understandable in the first place. Drawing on the significance of practice, Jan Niklas Collet points out that the claim to represent ecclesial orthodoxy can be made from within and without churches. For Collet, the question is *not* whether the new right has or has not hijacked Christianity—Collet calls this the 'instrumentalization thesis' (p. 180). The problem with this thesis is that it can be turned around: churches can critique the new right for hijacking as much as the new right can critique churches for hijacking. To counter these turns and counter-turns in the claim to ecclesial orthodoxy, Collet points out that the new right represents Christianity. The question is therefore which tropes and which themes from the history of theology this Christianity latches onto. Instead of arguing that the new right is carrying its propaganda and its politics into the church—from the outside to the inside—it thus becomes clear that the new right has always already been in churches. Hence, scholarship is called to scrutinize assumptions about 'theological and ecclesiological normality' (p. 182).

Jonas Erulo offers such scrutiny, conceptualizing church paradoxically as the practice of drawing distinctions for the sake of the universality of humanity. The following chapters continue the reflection on ecclesiological consequences. Julia Lis criticizes churches that call for the inclusion rather than the exclusion of the AfD. Ecclesologically, these arguments assume that the church is at the 'neutral centre' (p. 213) of the political spectrum so that it has to allow for all political positions that have won democratic elections. Lis stresses that this assumption merely follows a formal rather than a material understanding of democracy. It also fails to account for church as a community that aims to be more than a political club. According to Lis, 'the emergence of solidaric subjectivity is not simply the consequence of pluralist discourses in which the strongest argument prevails. Rather, it arises ... through the struggles of those who have been denied subjectivity' (p. 228). In these struggles, the church has to take a stand. Gregor Taxacher takes up Lis' critique, arguing that racism—regardless of whether it is expressed in color- or in culture-coded ways—marks the *status confessionis*. Pointing to the significance of neo-traditionalist accounts of the family for the politics of the new right, his discussion draws on classic accounts of this status in

Protestantism and Catholicism, arguing that the church's 'identity politics' assumes that its identity is for the other, the denigrated and the discriminated (p. 249).

The practical consequences of the critique of the normalization of the new right are detailed in the two concluding chapters that take up the sociological and theological contributions of the preceding parts. Christoph Holbein-Munske and Judith Wüllhorst spell out practical steps for countering new-right propaganda and new-right politics in public. The controversy stirred up by the AfD's representation at a recent church conference in Germany is a repeated reference point. Finally, Jan Niklas Collet, Julia Lis, and Gregor Taxacher close the compilation by returning to its point of departure—the interruption of the normalization of the new right through political theology.

Throughout, this volume is located at the cutting-edge of sociological and theological research on the far right, drawing on both national and international debates. While the concentration on the political theology of Metz can be a bit confining at times, it brings clarity and coherence to the collection of diverse contributions. The engagement with current theories of racism is exemplary. Crucially, the combination of epistemology and ethics that runs through the compilation enables the contributors to make a critical and self-critical turn, tackling theology as ambiguous knowledge that can be complacent, complicit, or critical of the far right. Thus, the contributors move the controversies stirred up by the rise of the far right in Germany forward in important and instructive ways. Both methodologically and thematically, a lot can be learnt from this collection.

### **Countering or Calling for the Normalization of the New Right? Complicating the Identity of Christianity**

My short survey shows that these two publications offer critiques of each other. The authors who advocate for 'de-demonization' could be criticized for their 'normalization' of far-right politics. The authors who advocate for "de-normalization" could be criticized for their 'demonization' of far-right politics. These competing analyses and conflicting arguments, I suggest, can be traced back to assumptions about the neutrality of the theologian. Here, the two publications are at opposite ends of the spectrum of possible theological positions. A review is not the place to enter into this debate, but for full disclosure I would like to point out that in the study of the role of religion in the European far right that I co-authored with Hannah Strømmen, the mainstreaming of the far-right is characterized as a threat that allows neither for theological nor for

<sup>1</sup>Hannah Strømmen and Ulrich Schmiedel, *The Claim to Christianity: Responding to the Far Right* (London: SCM, 2020).

<sup>2</sup>Enes Bayrakli and Farid Hafez (eds), *European Islamophobia Report 2021*, <https://islamophobiareport.com> [accessed November 12, 2022].

political neutrality.<sup>2</sup> As the *European Islamophobia Report* stresses year after year, the anti-Muslim racism of the far right is dangerous.<sup>3</sup> It attacks people psychologically and physically. Neutrality comes at the cost of those who suffer from far-right attacks. For the publications under review, it would be tempting to ascribe the positions on the spectrum to the respective denominational profiles, with Protestantism concentrating more on the state (rather than the church), and therefore following a more neutral-formal approach, and Catholicism concentrating more on the church (rather than the state), and therefore following a more normative-material approach. However, such ascriptions would cover up that the question of neutrality cuts to the core of the conceptualization of the identity of Christianity. Can Christianity be politically neutral? Can Christianity be politically normative? And where does one draw the line between theologically acceptable and theologically unacceptable political positions? If anti-Muslim racism indeed marks and maintains the new and the not-so-new far right in Germany, it might be helpful to reflect on the conceptualization of the identity of Christianity again—*together with* Muslim thinkers and theologians. While the publications under review concentrate on Christianity, they offer a promising point of departure for such critical and self-critical, comparative reflection. It is needed because both theologically and politically the stakes are high.