

Translated excerpt

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Die dunkle Seite der Christdemokratie.
Geschichte einer autoritären Versuchung

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The Dark Side of Christian Democracy.
The History of an Authoritarian Temptation

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Preface

This is a book about the relationship of Christian democratic parties to liberal democracy. As a critical analysis of a certain political ideology and family of parties, it will likely be seen as *overly* negative, perhaps as a political attack in the guise of an academic study. Conversely, it will also not be terribly surprising if political detractors of Christian democracy find this book *not critical* enough and accuse the author of treating his subject with kid gloves. Whatever the case, it must be assumed that the neutrality of the author will be questioned.

The fact that this book is *not* the work of a member of the Christian democratic faithful does not, however, mean that it's a polemic against Christian democracy. Although my conclusions, as the title reveals, primarily focus on what I call the "dark side" of Christian democracy, I'm more interested in understanding this phenomenon than pillorying or justifying it. We live at a time when nationalist and populist parties throughout Europe are trying to redefine conservatism. So better understanding Christian democracy as an especially influential strain of conservatism throughout history seems more productive than taking one side right from the start or manically trying to grab attention with horror scenarios of democracy's demise, as is so often the case in today's public debates.

In two senses, the battle going on right now in democracies across the world over the meaning of conservatism is also a struggle to determine the significance of democracy itself. One the one hand, when democracy is considered a form of *governmental rule*, the question becomes: How should it be calibrated in public institutions? In the liberal, representative form we know from the past? Or in plebiscitary fashion so that the "will of the people" is expressed directly in as many direct referenda as possible? Or perhaps "illiberally" in the style of a Viktor Orbán, with a strong figure at the top who seeks to rule and establish a political order by executive decree? But we can also emphasize the *practice of democracy*, the norms of democratic behavior, for instance, the difficult question of whether a big-tent conservative party like Germany's CDU-CSU should reject or cooperate with a far-right one like the AfD. The ways in which traditional conservative parties answer this question says much about their relationship to democracy itself.

As I hope to show in this book, Christian democracy in Europe has many different possible responses. Lack of consensus about the nature and worth of democracy has perennially been a part of the Christian democratic tradition – and not only that tradition. Reflecting on the tensions that have historically attended Christian democracy sheds light on the paths organized political conservatism in Europe might take in the future. After all, it must be assumed that conservative parties, including Christian democratic ones, will continue to be central in influencing the form and content of our politics, even if they have recently come under attack from various directions.

From the historical perspective, conservative parties have often played a leading role in stabilizing democracy. As numerous studies have shown, the success of a democratic system often depends on whether right-of-center political parties are willing to actively defend democracy and its institutions or whether they ally themselves, for tactical or ideological reasons, with authoritarianism. A paradigm example of the former are the nineteenth-century Tories in Britain, who succeeded in integrating reactionary, anti-democracy forces and converting them to the democratic cause. The opposite path was taken by many parties between the world wars, and many ended up mutating into quasi-fascist movements. One of them was the Christian Social Party in Austria, the predecessor of today's Austrian People's Party (ÖVP). Even a cursory glance at the spectrum of possibilities leave us no choice but to ask where Christian democracy actually stands

toward democracy itself and its enemies. This book will attempt to provide a systematic answer to this question.

Compared with other political ideologies and families of parties, examinations of Christian democracy are relatively rare. There are no standard academic works – to say nothing of non-fictional overviews for broad audiences. That’s astonishing. As the renowned historian Martin Conway remarked, Catholic-dominated Christian democracy should be a topic of central interest in historical and political about post-1945 Western European development if for no other reason than it, along with Soviet Communism, emerged as one of the great winners of the Second World War. In countries like West Germany, Italy, France and Belgium, Christian democrats not only dominated day-to-day politics. Frequently, they also determined the shapes of the constitutions adopted by their war-torn homelands. Moreover, there is unmistakable Christian handwriting all over the monumental achievement of uniting Europe in the European Union. Political scientist Jan-Werner Müller is entirely correct when he writes: “If you had to single out one idealistic and party-political movement as creating the political world in which we Europeans live in today, it would be Christian democracy.”

Since the early 1990s, there has been a body of serious, if exclusively academic, literature on the topic in several subdisciplines of history and political science. Research in the latter tends to examine Christian democracy in conjunction with the rise of European social welfare states. This special focus is down not only to the prominent role Christian democratic parties played in the post-war Economic Miracle in West Germany and the *Trente Glorieuses* in France. It is also connected to German and French political parties’ belief, as big-tent associations, that economic conflicts can be solved compromise between social classes. Meanwhile, the role of Christian democratic principals in the day-to-day business of politics receives little notice at all.

This limited interest pales in comparison to the countless studies on ideologies like social democracy, socialism and communism. Indeed, some of the most important works about social democracy fail to mention, even in the passing, its great historical rival, Christian democracy. What’s behind this selective interest? It may sound cliché, but social scientists tend to sympathize with the leftwing ideologies, which may lead them to neglect other political currents. (Rightwing populism is the conspicuous exception.) The fact that an influential thinker like Jürgen Habermas has dismissed the post-war years, in which Christian Democrats were so prominent, as an era of “restoration” undoubtedly also encouraged neglect among political scientists.

Historical research on Christian democracy has been far more productive, although a lively and diverse community of scholars interested in the various forms of political Catholicism has only arisen in the past three decades. Many of their works are characterized by an intense sensitivity toward lines of inquiry in theology, sociology and the history of ideas, and they have actively sought out dialogue with the social sciences, particularly political science and sociology. It is also relevant for the study of Christian democracy that interest has been growing among international historians in the Roman Catholic Church and lay Catholicism. In the past decade a number of major historical studies on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Catholicism have appeared, and they, too, discuss the variety of parties and organization of political Catholicism and Christian democracy.

Along with various political biographies and primary sources, historical research on political Catholicism has been enormously influential on the theses formulated in this book. This literature sensitized me in unique fashion to the tension between the Church and the faithful in the modern

era. The greatest challenge faced by Catholics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was how to reconcile the traditional articles of faith with bourgeois capitalism and the political institutions of the secular nation-state. For that reason, exponents of the political Catholicism that arose in the second half of the nineteenth century and that produced Christian democracy roughly a century later began to search for a specifically Catholic response to modernity and the trinity of industrial capitalism, the labor movement and liberal democracy. Despite papal intervention, no practical unity was ever attained. Some Catholics longed for a return to monarchism, while others preferred an authoritarian caste society, and others supported democracy.

Different historical characteristics of political Catholicism are still with us today, even though the nominally Christian parties of the early twenty-first century have little to do with their late-nineteenth-century predecessors. Viktor Orbán's Fidesz, which describes itself as Christian, has abolished liberal democracy in Hungary, and it is telling that until the spring of 2021 leading European Christian democrats were still defending the party. It's an oversimplification to deny the ideological character of Orbán's politics and dismiss it cynical opportunism in the interest of power. That's rarely the case. If it were otherwise, the Hungarian prime minister and his henchmen would hardly have had so much success mobilizing religion for their authoritarian political project and winning approval from ultra-conservative forces within the European Christian democratic movement – as well as applause from Salvini, Kaczyński and their ilk. It's impossible to say conclusively whether politicians truly believe the things they say, yet it probably rare for them to locate themselves within specific ideological traditions, which they defend for years and decades, without some conviction that the basic tenets are correct. For that reason, the new Christian illiberalism manifest in Orbán's party needs to be taken very seriously.

One of the main contentions of this book was that the first era of Christian democracy after the Second World War was a twenty-year anomaly. In contrast to their immediate historical predecessors, most post-war Christian democrats were passionate supporters of democracy who strove for peace, reconstruction and stability in Europe – at least within a certain framework of representative democratic institutions. Nevertheless, even those who considered democracy a virtue in and of itself had a dark side. The authoritarian spirit of the past was by no means overcome, as is evident in how deeply many Christian democrats admired the dictators Franco and Salazar on the Iberian peninsula and how tense their relationship with the free press was. Not surprisingly, the sort of democracy favored by post-war Christian democrats, which found its ideal manifestation in the strong leadership of West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, had clear limits and was by no means lived out to its fullest. Often enough, Christian democrats had no real use for the principle of majority rule.

Post-war Christian democracy underwent a period of liberalization, taking it, jolt by jolt, away from its original conservative orientation. In Germany, this happened particularly during the long reign of Chancellor Helmut Kohl. The price for the transformation was an ideological hollowing-out that encouraged the subsequent expansion of the Christian democratic family of political parties. Especially in the final stages of the Cold War, the international Christian democratic party network grew constantly, integrating multiple conservative parties with no significant Christian democratic foundation whatsoever. Ultimately, in 2014, the eastern expansion of the EU, pushed through by leading Christian democrats, would become central to what we today see as Christian democratic policies. In Hungary and Poland, the EU gained two member states that want to enact their own ideas of illiberal Christian tradition in the twenty-first century despite international opposition. Ironically, in this regard, they attempt to present themselves as the true heirs of postwar Christian democracy, as true Europeans and the last defenders of the Christian Occident. And to be honest:

Does Viktor Orbán not have something of a point when he compares his aims and visions with those of classic Christian democracy? This book wants shed light on precisely this question.

Christian-Democratic Strategies

The dramatic defeat of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), in Germany's 2021 national election called into question the whole Christian democratic agenda. Should Christian democrats position themselves further to the right or continue the centrism of former Chancellor Angela Merkel and remain open to coalitions with left-of-center parties? Austrian Christian democrats have tried out both approaches in recent years. Under former Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, the rejuvenated Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) formed a coalition from 2017 to 2019 with the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), often described as "rightwing populist." But starting in 2020, it shared power with the Greens, who had reentered parliament in the national elections of 2019 after suffering a crushing debacle only three years earlier. The shift right in Austrian society in the wake of the "refugee crisis" of 2015 brought Kurz, who promised to close the "Balkan route," his first term as chancellor, but that was as far as changes in policy went. And the Austrian Christian democrats didn't close the door on a governmental partnership with a party that on the left end of the spectrum.

Kurz's original success was not only based on his move to the right on immigration and integration issues, which clearly distanced him from Merkel. Just as significant was how he recast the ÖVP as a highly personalized, political movement. When he assumed leadership of the party in 2017, it wasn't particularly attractive to young Austrians, but Kurz summarily redefined it as a "new people's party" with an electoral "Kurz list." The clerical black in the party logo gave way to a more dynamic turquoise, and instead of fielding the usual career politicians and association representatives as candidates, the ÖVP nominated more-or-less well-known personalities from the realms of science, sports and culture. The strategy paid off. Although Kurz has, as of this writing, left politics and now works for German-American tech investor Peter Thiel, the "Kurz model" remains a blueprint for Christian democratic renewal.

A rival model of contemporary Christian democratic politics can be found over the border from Austria in Hungary. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is perhaps the most successful conservative politician of the present day. Since 2010, he has enjoyed a latitude of which other European Christian democratic politicians and parties can only dream. Thanks to the idiosyncrasies of the Hungarian electoral system and its stable cooperation with junior party *Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt*, Orbán's Fidesz party wields a two-thirds parliamentary majority, allowing it to dramatically change the country's constitution. Orbán has exercised this option repeatedly to cement his own power, most prominently in 2013, when the constitution was altered to strip the constitutional court of the authority to judge the content and not just the form of laws and to ban political advertisements from private media, i.e. media not controlled by Fidesz.

Orbán's politics are controversial, and he has been accused of aiming to torpedo liberal democracy and turn Hungary into a quasi-authoritarian regime. This is the conclusion reached not only by his left-of-center opponents but also by a consensus of leading legal scholars and political scientists – and legal experts aren't usually considered overly leftwing. For example, in their renowned book *How Democracies Die*, American political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt classify Hungary as a "mildly authoritarian regime." Professor of Sociology and International Affairs in the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs Kim Lane Sheppelle calls Hungary a "Frankenstein state," in which an autocratic monster has been stitched together from constitutional

elements that are originally democratic. Many other respected observers are also of the opinion that Hungary can no longer be described, without qualification, as a democracy at all.

And what about Orbán himself, who makes no bones about his desire to make Hungary into what he calls an “illiberal democracy?” The Hungarian prime minister not only claims that these aims are compatible with the ideals of Christian democracy but insists that true Christian democratic politics are *necessarily* illiberal. The “renaissance of Christian democracy” so crucial to Europe’s survival, as Orbán claimed in a speech before party allies, presupposes a decisive renunciation of liberalism, which “is incapable of protecting our peoples, nations, families...in other words our European way of life.” Consequently, Orbán argues, instead of building an “anti-populist front” against parties like the Italian Lega or the French Rassemblement National, politicians should provide “responsible answers” to the questions posed by today’s “rightwing populist” parties and remain open to working with them. Orbán himself sees this attitude as being in the “conservative tradition” of European Christian democracy.

The New Axis of Christian Democracy

Immediately after the Second World War, Europe experienced its “Christian democratic moment.” Christian democratic parties succeeded in winning elections in a number of countries or at least earned enough votes to secure major political offices. Without doubt the most important parties were West Germany’s Christian Democratic Union (CDU), France’s Mouvement Républicain Populaire und Italy’s Democrazia Cristiana. Their leaders—Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schuman and Alcide De Gasperi – promised stability and peace and used their power to promote European integration. In so doing they also defined what Christian democracy means today. What they offered was as simple as it was convincing. Instead of pushing political utopias, they called for a return to Christian values, respectability and morality. The idea was also to appeal to the broadest possible segments of society as a big-tent party.

Some seventy-five years later, the Christian democratic parties of Germany, Austria and Hungary (we will return in detail to the question of whether Fidesz truly qualifies as such) are the ones that mainly determine what today’s Christian democracy stands for. The parties formerly influential in the other core Christian democratic countries of Europe have gradually disappeared. In 1994, the once dominant Democrazia Cristiana dissolved in the Tangentopoli corruption scandal. The Mouvement Républicain Populaire had already lost its political significance in the 1950s and fell apart in 1967. The CDU and its Bavarian sister CSU in Germany, the ÖVP and Fidesz are thus the last larger parties in Europe (due to the size of the country the Chrëschtlech Sozial Vollekspartei in Luxembourg can be discounted) that more or less emphatically proclaim their fidelity to Christian democratic ideals. Fiedesz was relatively late in declaring this loyalty. Originally, Orbán’s party defined itself as liberal and only converted to Christian democracy in the late 1990s. By contrast, the ÖVP and CDU/CSU looked back on long party traditions with a core constituency of religion and bourgeois voters, whose numbers gradually dwindled and continue to do so today. That is the source of a further commonality between the three associations. Nonetheless, these parties remain capable of mobilizing sizeable, heterogenous groups of voters. Their results in the last two decades cannot be compared with those achieved in post-war years when party loyalty was much stronger in various segments of society and Christian democrats regularly polled over forty percent. On the other hand there’s no denying that the CDU/CSU, the ÖVP and Fidesz have recorded generally solid electoral performances – a long-term trend suggesting that German conservatives will recover from their 2021 defeat. In a nutshell, German, Austrian and Hungarian Christian democrats are conspicuously prominent in the European party landscape, although big-tent parties in generally and normative

Christian democratic frames of reference in particular have dramatically lost significance over the past four decades.

Furthermore, they are connected by the fact that for some time now Christian democratic parties have defined themselves to a high degree through their relationship to conservative nationalist or rightwing populist forces, which attract massive media attention and appeal to much of the same clientele. But there are enormous differences in which the former have positioned themselves toward the latter. The Hungarian strategy of assimilation is just as unthinkable in Germany as the Austria course of cooperativeness: there would be a wave of outrage if Germany's CDU/CSU were to form a national coalition with the far-right populist AfD. Likewise, it is difficult to image Austrian Christian democrats becoming "Orbanized," as that would surely alienate the youthful, liberal clientele of the ÖVP. At the same time, the fact that the ÖVP and the rightwing populist FPÖ collaborated multiple times in government precludes any stark ideological differentiation. Meanwhile in Hungary, due to the changes in the constitution that handed a maximum of power to Fidesz, it's hard to conceive any alterations to the status quo. It became evident how secure Orban's hold on power is in late March 2020, when in the context of the corona pandemic Fidesz hustled a law through parliament allowing the prime minister to rule by decree for an unlimited time in case of emergency. It also enabled the government to extend such a period of emergency for an unlimited time without the consent of parliament.

Electoral Preferences and Future Scenarios

Today's Christian democratic parties spent lots of time and energy positioning themselves – that's due in part to the core causes of conservative nationalist/rightwing populist associations like the AfD and FPÖ. Popular demands to restrict immigration and protect national identity and sovereignty have redrawn lines of social conflict and altered the arena of democratic representation by political parties. Traditional poles like labor versus capital or city versus town are increasingly overshadowed by the battle between "nationalists" and "globalists," or as British journalist David Goodhart pithily put it the "somewheres" and the "anywheres." Goodhart's "somewheres" are skeptical or even outrightly hostile toward globalization, European integration and multiculturalism. They long for everything in their homelands to return to "the way it used to be." By contrast, "anywheres" have little time for concepts like the national or ethnically defined peoples, feel completely at home in a culturally diverse, "post-national" world and look down with derision as what they see as the reactionary "somewheres." Although all political parties have no choice but no position themselves within this dichotomy, Christian democrats face special challenges since the competition from new political actors on the Right is aimed primarily at them.

Particularly in Germany, this development has occasioned a lively debate about the present and future of conservatism, of which Christian democracy is usually considered a part. Germany's Christian Democrats are still searching for an agenda and an image after Angela Merkel, while former AfD party co-leader Alexander Gauland has claimed this new association is the "true conservative force in Germany." The outcome of this struggle will depend, in the words of German political scientist Thomas Biebricher, on "whether the AfD succeeds in permanently appropriating the mantle of conservatism or at least prevents its main rival from doing so, portraying it as having been completely absorbed by the toxic left-wing swamp of mainstream politics – or whether, conversely, the representatives of Christian democracy are able to permanently distinguish their brand of self-proclaimed respectable conservatism from the disreputable rightwing populism of the AfD." Biebricher's words elegantly sum up the current challenges of the CDU/CSU and other Christian democratic parties. Should they not live up to those challenges, he continues, "it cannot be ruled out

that conservatism collapses, sooner or later, into rightwing populism, that intellectual and political borders are torn down, and that there will be no more obstacles to political cooperation with the radical right.”

Admittedly, it is only in Germany that the internal conflict between Christian democracy and rightwing populism/conservative nationalism remains unresolved. In Austria and Hungary, Christian democracy has already developed in directions that increasingly blur the boundaries with conservative nationalism. Nonetheless, the German debate poses two extraordinarily important questions for the present day and future of European Christian democracy. Firstly, what strategy and tendency will emerge dominant in the European Union’s most populous country? Will the post-Merkel CDU/CSU court the people who vote for conservative nationalism or will the party retain its liberal centrism? Secondly and more complexly, which strategy is actually more Christian democratic? Rejection, political compromise or “orbanesque” assimilation? What of these paths is actually the most compatible with the values, traditions and ideals of Christian democracy?