

## CHAPTER 1

# Consensus and Conflict in Times of Crisis

## Religion in Austria during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

Overall, religion was not an intensively discussed topic in Austria in relation to coronavirus. Governmental and religious actors collaborated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and Austria's legally recognised religious communities supported governmental measures, such as lockdowns, social distancing, and the obligation to wear masks. This consensus was communicated in press conferences and regular meetings between the ministry in charge and religious representatives. Religious communities refrained from or restricted celebrating on site during lockdowns and introduced hygiene measures (e.g. disinfection

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of hands and artefacts, wearing masks, limiting singing, restricting numbers of participants during celebrations) for religious gatherings throughout the pandemic. Official representatives of the legally recognised religious communities also supported vaccination campaigns and several religious sites functioned as temporary vaccination stations. However, religious actors and elements were also present among anti-vaccination activists and protesters against COVID-19 measures, and they joined in with the propagation of conspiracy theories. In these protests, ultra-conservative Catholics, Evangelicals, and esotericists marched alongside followers of the radical right Identitarian movement and other extremists. Multiple instances of anti-Semitic expression were documented throughout the protests. Still, religion was not a particularly contentious issue during the pandemic. This is, as we argue, largely the result of the commitment of religious communities to self-restriction and their cooperation with state authorities, as the legal framework restricted religion much less than other spheres.

## Introduction

Throughout the pandemic, the Austrian religious mainstream cooperated with state institutions to promote safety, governmental rules on social distancing, and vaccination. The first lockdown in 2020 affected Christian Easter celebrations, Jewish Pesach, and Islamic Ramadan festivities. On-site gatherings were largely prohibited and religious authorities and governmental representatives jointly communicated these restrictions. This is typical for the cooperative religion–state interaction Austria has established upon a long historic tradition. As we show in our chapter, throughout the pandemic, the Austrian model of cooperation in religion–state relations proved effective in pursuing state goals, even though it could be argued that the internal religious coronavirus protection measures functioned as a surrogate for state action. So, rather than attributing the arrangements to any legal source known to the Austrian constitutional system, the relatively harmonious collaboration of state actors and religious elites has to be attributed to a political culture fostered by this specific mode of religion–state relations. Austria does not have a rich history of juridical activism regarding religious minorities. Legally acknowledged religious communities usually seek to influence policy decisions through the channels their status provides and, as we argue, did so during the pandemic.

In the past, courts had been concerned with a series of cases pursued by non-recognised religious groups that aimed for this privileged legal status. However, as we elaborate on in the legal section, the number of court cases challenging COVID-19 measures from a religious point of view was comparatively low.

## Setting the Context

Concerning state–religion relations, Austria is classified as a ‘system of shared tasks’ (Minkenberg 2003), characterised by the exclusive collaboration of state institutions and legally acknowledged religious communities. With a P-index of 0.25 (compared to an EU average of 0.28), the promotion of religious (minority) rights can be considered relatively enabling (Ferrari et al. 2024). Despite the historical dominance of the Catholic Church, Austria has an inclusive legal setting concerning minority religions. In 2023, 16 religious communities were legally acknowledged, among them 12 Christian churches and one Jewish, one Buddhist, and two Islamic communities (for an overview, see Federal Chancellery 2023). These communities enjoy an extensive set of privileges, such as state subsidies, the right to provide state-funded religious instruction in public schools, and the right to be consulted in the law-making process (for an overview of Austrian religion law, see Kowatsch 2022). From very early on in the pandemic, representatives of these communities were involved in coordinated action and crisis communication regarding the regulation of religious life.

The majority of the Austrian population is affiliated with a religious community. In 2021, Statistics Austria conducted a survey on the ‘religious affiliation of the population in private households’. These most recent numbers show the following affiliations: 55.2 per cent Catholic, 8.3 per cent Islamic, 4.9 per cent Christian Orthodox, 3.8 per cent Protestant, 5.5 per cent affiliated with other religious traditions (e.g. Buddhism, Judaism, other Christian churches), and 22.4 per cent not affiliated (Statistics Austria 2022).

Overall, religion was not an intensively discussed topic during the pandemic. The official representatives of the legally recognised religious communities have widely supported governmental measures as well as vaccination campaigns. Soon after the first COVID-19 measures were installed, many religious communities announced their responses in coordination with the federal government: Christian

churches, among them the Catholic Church in a leading role, promoted government measures (Kathpress 2020a) and implemented far-reaching restrictions on religious activities (Kathpress 2020b). Often, these restrictions exceeded the legally binding measures (see the following section on legal aspects). During the first lockdown, from March 2020 onwards, the Islamic Religious Community (Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft, IGGÖ) called for the suspension of all forms of religious gatherings in Austria's Islamic religious sites. The IGGÖ also announced to provide Islamic religious infrastructure (mosques, communal rooms, etc) across Austria for the provision for those in need, if required by the Austrian government (IGGÖ 2020). The Jewish Religious Community (Israelitische Kultusgemeinde, IKG) announced that all synagogues would be closed and religious gatherings including prayers, lectures, and ritual baths would be suspended (European Training and Research Centre for Human Rights and Democracy 2020). While restrictions were altered throughout the pandemic, cooperation remained the main mode. For example, when vaccination became available, several religious sites functioned as (contemporary) vaccination stations, e.g. at St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna city centre (Katholisch.at 2021) and at various mosques across the city (Urban 2021), as well as in Jewish facilities (Ikg-wien.at 2021).

There were no leading voices among Austria's religious communities that advocated against vaccination or COVID-19 measures. Rather, leading figures called for trust in science. Cardinal Christoph Schönborn stated: 'I am very concerned that a scepticism about science is spreading. And a cluelessness about how science works.' He also related the growing problems of conspiracy adherents to the problem that 'we do not admit to ourselves that we live in an uncertain time' (Erzdiözese-wien.at 2021). The diocese of Innsbruck published a comprehensive statement on the question of vaccination, pointing out that 'vaccination is not a question of faith' but a scientific achievement. The reasons for this statement were increased inquiries about the advocacy of vaccination by the church and increased church resignations with the same reasoning (Vaticannews.va 2022).

However, various small groups within the Catholic Church called loudly for the abandonment of vaccinations in churches and church support for vaccination. A leading figure in these Catholic protests was Alexander Tschugguel, an ultra-conservative activist who had been protesting against non-traditionalist forms of practice and beliefs since

long before the pandemic (Gaigg and Hagen 2022). One group, calling itself the ‘Catholics of Austria’, started a petition against vaccination stations in churches (Citizengo 2021). By 2023, this petition had collected 12,414 signatures. Individual Catholic priests faced disciplinary measures for spreading fake news in their parishes (e.g. Kurier.at 2021).

Research on religion and COVID-19 was focused on issues of digitalisation. Austria, for example, participated in the international survey ‘Churches Online in Times of Corona’ (<https://contoc.org/>). Other studies investigated the impact of the pandemic on religiosity (Aschauer, Glatz, and Prandner 2022), chaplaincy (Berghofer, Petritsch, and Schwarz 2020), pastoral perspectives (Körtner 2021), and legal aspects (Drößler, Kämper, and Schilberg 2020). Furthermore, multiple social surveys were conducted throughout the pandemic and also asked about religious issues. Most importantly, a special edition of the European Value Survey and a panel study (the Austrian Corona Panel) documented developments throughout the pandemic (see [Chapter 4](#), this volume).

## Legal Aspects

In Austria, buildings dedicated to personal and collective religious practice (churches, synagogues, mosques, etc.) were allowed to remain open for private, individual prayer throughout the pandemic. Public religious services were suspended in the first year of the pandemic, parallel to the ‘lockdowns’ imposed by the state authorities, some nationwide and some only regionally. At no time were religious services completely cancelled, but during the suspensions they were only allowed to be celebrated in very small circles. From the end of November 2021, however, there were no more suspensions of religious services, not even when a new ‘lockdown’ was imposed on other areas of society.

As mentioned before, a special feature of the Austrian legal pandemic management was that the recognised churches and religious societies had the opportunity to independently standardise infection protection measures for the celebration of their public religious services. From March 2020 onwards, several agreements were reached between the federal government or the minister responsible and the recognised religious communities, which had all the hallmarks of a contract (Bischofskonferenz.at 2021; Kathpress 2020b; Oberösterreichische

Nachrichten 2020; Pressestelle von Bundesministerin Susanne Raab 2021; for a detailed legal analysis, see Kowatsch 2022). Their content was, on the one hand, the renunciation by the state of the exercise of a competence to which it is entitled in the area of public religious practice (enactment of pandemic control measures applicable to all) and, on the other hand, the obligation of the religious communities to enact measures for the celebration of religious services that corresponded to the measures imposed by the state for other public areas with regard to the protection against infection on their own. This internal regulation allowed the individual religious communities to adapt the measures to their own (cultic) requirements without the state having to directly regulate the conduct of religious acts. The tightening or loosening of state measures was always the occasion for analogous adjustments by the religious communities.

To understand why the 'legally recognised churches and religious societies' in Austria were able to adopt their own normative measures in close coordination with the state authorities, the Austrian constitutional law on religion must be briefly outlined.

The Austrian Federal Constitutional Law (B-VG) does not have an independent catalogue of fundamental rights. Instead, the State Basic Law (StGG) of 1867 and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) are incorporated into the constitutional order. In addition to Article 14 of the StGG, Article 63 of the Treaty of Saint-Germain 1919 and Article 9 of the ECHR standardise the freedom of religion and belief of individuals. State interference in this fundamental right may only take place based on a legal foundation and, even then, is only permitted within the narrow limits of Article 9(2) of the ECHR. In addition, interventions must be necessary to achieve the desired goal, and the means chosen must be effective and proportionate. If even one of these conditions is not met, state interference in the fundamental right is unconstitutional.

Concerning the COVID-19 measures in general, the Constitutional Court (Verfassungsgerichtshof, VfGH) clarified that although the legislature has a wide margin of discretion owing to the considerable danger to life and the stability of the health system, restrictions must always be suitable, necessary, appropriate overall, and differentiated according to type and extent. Disproportionate restrictions of fundamental rights are always prohibited. The court must be able to understand the basis and scientific findings on which the restrictions on freedom were

necessary. If several fundamental rights, such as freedom of public religious expression or freedom of assembly, collide with the protection of health, a balancing of interests must take place. Although the VfGH considers the protection of health to be an 'objective of considerable weight', the right to life is by no means automatically and in every situation more important than other fundamental rights.

In addition to individual rights, Article 9 of the ECHR already protects a minimum of corporate autonomy for all religious communities. Moreover, Article 15 of the StGG guarantees that 'recognised churches and religious societies' can regulate and administer their 'internal affairs'. While the state remains responsible for all secular matters, legislation in the specifically religious sphere goes beyond state competence. Matters that affect both the state legal system and the mission of a religious community (e.g. pastoral care in hospitals, prisons, and the armed forces; religion as a school subject for members of a recognised religion) are dealt with in close consultation between the state and the religious communities. Therefore, the relationship between the state and the religious communities in Austria can be described as a cooperative model characterised by institutional separation and multiple forms of encounter and cooperation. In principle, all religious communities can invoke freedom of religion (Article 9 of the ECHR, Article 14 of the StGG, Article 63(2) of the Treaty of Saint-Germain 1919). In addition to registration as associations under civil law, communities can also acquire state legal personality as 'state-registered religious confessional communities'. The third and highest level of legal recognition is the status of a 'legally recognised church or religious society'. Only these religious communities act as corporations under public law, and this categorisation opens up special areas of cooperation with state authorities. As prerequisites for obtaining this status, the law requires a positive commitment to the fundamental values of the state legal system, a certain minimum number of believers, and an organisational density that ensures the community's institutional existence. Under these general conditions, public law status is open to all religious communities on a parity basis.

In the first pandemic period, therefore, it was not only freedom of religion alone but also this very special constitutionally guaranteed status of the recognised churches and religious societies that was the basis for agreements made between the state bodies and the religious communities.

Peter Schipka, secretary general of the Austrian Bishops' Conference, speaks of the 'agreement' as an 'Austrian' way:

So although there would have been a lot to be said for the state also regulating religious life, at least as far as assemblies are concerned, for reasons of health protection, it has not done so, apart from a few small exceptions. Rather, those politically responsible ... have decided to follow the path of Article 15 of the StGG and, even in times of pandemic, to leave the legally recognized churches and religious societies to regulate their internal affairs in their legal autonomy. (Schipka 2021, 255)

Even before the beginning of the first 'lockdown' in 2020, a discussion had already taken place in the Federal Chancellery between, on the state side, the federal chancellor, the minister of health, the minister of the interior and the minister of the chancellery with technical responsibility for religious affairs and, for the religions, top representatives of the recognised churches and religious societies. Probably in view of the relative size of the Catholic Church and thus for reasons of representation and efficiency, the chairman of the Austrian Bishops' Conference was assigned a kind of spokesman role for the religious societies. This was made clear by joint press conferences by the president of the Austrian Bishops' Conference and the minister of the chancellery responsible for cultural affairs at the beginning of the lockdown and before the resumption of public worship services on 15 May 2020. This, of course, could not be conferred on the Viennese cardinal by the state organs, since this would have contradicted not only the principle of parity but also the institutional separation of church and state. According to reports, however, the representatives of the other recognised churches and religious societies subsequently accepted this role – partly because there were no alternatives to it. They were informed about the further steps via the General Secretariat of the Catholic Bishops' Conference, unless general meetings (very soon then digital) enabled everyone to participate anyway. However, since the public practice of religion is not a privilege of legally recognised religious societies alone, the question that would arise for the future was whether and how other religious communities could also be included in such coordinating meetings.

The state authorities left the responsibility for enacting and monitoring infection control measures to the religious communities. The reason for this – of course – was not that the virus would have been less dangerous in religious gatherings but the legal principle that



interference with fundamental rights is not necessary if the goal can also be achieved in a way that better protects freedom. In this sense, the cooperation system for the area of freedom of religion and belief is also an expression of the principle of subsidiarity, which assumes that the more intensive restrictions on freedom are linked to the reality of the life of those affected, the more likely they are to be accepted by the subjects of the law.

Legally, this special form of cooperation was expressed by the fact that the respective applicable regulations provided for exceptions for 'events for the practice of religion'. In the later course of the pandemic, such events were completely excluded from the scope of the state regulations. The problem was that the regulations did not refer to the internal measures, so that – in purely formal legal terms – religious services were not subject to any (state) regulations at all. In terms of 'lived' law, however, this was never the case owing to the agreements between the state and the religious communities and the internal ordinances based on them. Also, except for public religious services, all other events for the practice of religion were – formally without legal basis – subjected to state measures, contrary to the wording of the regulations. Nor were the recognised religious communities the only legal entities that could autonomously take protective measures. The same exception applied to universities, for example, but not to the field of art and culture.

For this reason, a group of cultural workers filed an application for a review of the regulation by the Constitutional Court (VfGH) under Article 139 (1) (3) of the Federal Constitution (B-VG). The aim of this appeal was to establish the unlawfulness of a regulation at the request of a person who claims to have had their rights directly violated by an unlawful ordinance. The applicants argued that the differentiated treatment of artistic or cultural events on the one hand and religious gatherings on the other contradicted the principle of equality. They argued that there was no factual justification and that no significant differences could be identified.

In continuity with earlier findings on anti-Coronavirus measures, the VfGH held that the various restrictions on people coming together constitute intensive encroachments on freedom, which is protected by different fundamental rights. To ensure that they do not lead to an unjustified violation of constitutional rights, they must not only be proportionate but also comply with the principle of equality. The principle of equality is also binding for the legislature. Unobjective

differentiations that cannot be justified by actual differences are just as prohibited as unobjective equal treatment of unequal things. Beyond the wording of Article 7 of the B-VG (principle of equality), the judiciary saw the fundamental prohibition there of enacting regulations that cannot be justified.

In its decision, the VfGH stated that all types of religious gatherings were permitted (VfGH 2020, paragraph 56). In contrast, gatherings in the exercise of artistic freedom had been completely prohibited. In its final evaluation of equality law, the Constitutional Court then referred exclusively to Article 9 ECHR by comparing the freedom of religious practice standardised there with the freedom of art in Article 17a of the State Basic Law of 1867 (StGG). With regard to the objective of the restrictions of the regulation of emergency measures, being the subject of the proceedings – which was to prevent gatherings of people as far as possible – there were no such difference between the gathering of people for religious purposes on the one hand and for artistic purposes on the other hand. In light of the protective purpose of the combated regulation, the unobjective unequal treatment of the areas of protection made the exemption provision in favour of gatherings for the practice of religion unlawful, because the second variant, namely the permission to enter cultural institutions, would have caused considerably wider openings that could not be attributed to the legislature, the Constitutional Court concluded. Since the respective regulation had already expired on 11 December 2021, the VfGH limited itself to stating that the exception for religious services had been unlawful.

As expected, the decision was met with criticism from religious communities. The president of the Protestant synod, Peter Krömer, for example, expressed ‘the greatest surprise. The public reception of the finding, he said, gave the impression that church services should have been allowed to be celebrated entirely free of restrictions’ (Evang.at 2023). Shortly after the decision was published, the responsible minister sought to clarify that faith and the common practice of religion, as well as corresponding opportunities for pastoral care, would provide support for many people in the country, especially in times of crisis. These would therefore have a particularly high value, not only for the individual but for society as a whole (Katholisch.at 2022c).

Although with different emphases, this decision of the VfGH was also unanimously criticised by the prevailing doctrine of Austrian law on religion (Kowatsch 2022; Potz and Schinkele 2023). The most

important point of criticism was that the court completely disregarded Article 15 of the StGG, which guarantees the corporate freedom of recognised churches and religious communities. Nor was it considered that the exception for religious gatherings was by no means the only one. Exceptions existed, among other things, where strong institutions could guarantee the enforcement of internal measures (e.g. universities and parliaments).

An important indicator of whether the institutions of the constitutional state were up to the challenges of pandemic management is the number of cases that ended up in court. While in most European countries court actions were brought by individual believers and churches and other religious communities, in Austria there were only a very few court cases fighting the encroachment of freedom of religion or belief – including, among others, the above-mentioned judgment of the VfGH.

## Sociological Aspects

Community life in religious context was deeply interrupted by the pandemic. Religious buildings remained open throughout the pandemic but religious gatherings took place according to the rather strict rules on general meetings. As on-site religious celebration did not take place during the first lockdowns and was widely restricted throughout the years of the pandemic, most religious communities started to provide digital services, ranging from livestream services to interactive social media activities. Counselling was in great demand, both online and over the telephone (Humer et al. 2021). This brought about various innovations. For example, during the pandemic, a Muslim telephone counselling service was set up (ORF 2022).

Interreligious activities were likewise affected by the pandemic. Initiatives such as #keepingittogether, mutual messages of Jews and Christians for Easter/Pesach, and ‘Coronaspection’ proved that the sudden digitalisation of the religious field also provided new possibilities of exchange and collaboration among religions (Jäggle 2020).

In 2020, there were fewer Catholic baptisms and weddings but a higher number of Catholic funerals (Katholisch.at 2022a). The Protestant Church (Lutheran confession) reported a significantly higher share of baptisms in 2021 (2.243) and 2022 (2.429) than in 2020 (1.644) (Evang.at 2022). Most likely, these celebrations included many

that had been postponed in 2020. Comparable data for other religious communities are not available.

We can assume that the pandemic affected religious affiliation across traditions, but there are limited data available. In 2020, 58,727 people left the Catholic Church. This number is lower than in the years before (2019: 67,794) and after (2021: 72,055). On the church's statistical website, the assumption is expressed that restricted access to official public authorities resulted in many people postponing their exit (Katholisch.at 2022b). In 2022, 90,808 left the Catholic Church, the highest number up to that time. Also, in 2022, official church publications assumed that the high numbers of church exit related to unpopular COVID-19 measures and a greater distance between the church and its members that emerged during the pandemic (Bischofskonferenz.at 2023). The Protestant Church (Lutheran and Helvetian confessions) reported 5,641 exits in 2020 and 5,592 in 2021, fewer than in 2019 (Statistics Austria 2022). The numbers of exits from the Old Catholic Church were higher than in previous years (2019: 46; 2020: 56; 2021: 70).

According to sociological surveys on religion during the pandemic (in this case, the Austrian Corona Panel Project; see <https://viecer.univie.ac.at/coronapanel>), people who reported a higher level of religiosity (measured by their frequency of praying and the importance they attached to religion and church) were initially more likely to support COVID-19 measures (Aschauer, Höllinger, and Herbst 2020). This, however, is a shrinking part of the total population. Data from both the Austrian Corona Panel Project (ibid.) and the European Value Study COVID-19 Special Edition Austria unanimously showed an overall declining importance of religion during the pandemic. The European Value Survey assesses the development of religion along six items: (a) the importance of religion in individuals' lives, (b) the importance of God in their lives, (c) being religious (yes or no), (d) frequency of prayer, (e) attendance of religious services, and (f) trust in 'the church'. While the trend lines on all six items have been pointing steadily downward since the 1990s, the 2021 COVID-19 Special Edition data show that this development was much more drastic between 2018 and 2021. The authors of the survey state:

God and religion have become less important, people are less religious, less likely to pray, less likely to attend a church service, and less likely

to trust the church. However, the 2021 COVID-19 Special Edition data show that the drop accelerated between 2018 and 2021 – about as much as the cumulative drop of three decades earlier. (Willmann 2022)

Regarding different coping strategies, a study based on the Austrian Corona Panel Project (Höllinger and Aschauer 2022) found that religious people were more active in seeking support during the crisis and in active engagement with the challenges of the pandemic. They were also somewhat more optimistic than non-religious people. Negating the crisis was a response much more often taken up by non-religious people. This study also compared the attitudes of conventionally religious people to adherents of alternative forms of religion and spirituality:

In contrast, spiritually oriented individuals reveal a greater distance to the federal government, to institutions and to the Corona behavioural guidelines. Actively spiritual persons in particular oppose the measures set more strongly, revealing an extremely sceptical view of the government-imposed behavioural guidelines. (Höllinger and Aschauer 2022, 142)

Despite the functioning cooperation among political and religious leaders and support by conventionally religious people for the measures agreed upon, religious actors and elements were present among anti-vaccination activists and protesters against COVID-19 measures, and they joined in with the propagation of conspiracy theories. In these protests, some ultra-conservative Catholics, Evangelicals, and esotericists marched alongside followers of the radical right Identitarian movement and other extremists. Multiple instances of anti-Semitic expression were documented throughout the protests (Sulzbacher 2021).

Also, the Archdiocese of Vienna expressly warned against participation in ‘pseudo-religious processions’. After some anti-Coronavirus measures protests were prohibited, groups invoked religious freedom to hold processions (*Wiener Zeitung* 2021). Political scientist Thomas Schmidinger documented and analysed the influx that Catholic traditionalists experienced throughout the pandemic (Schmidinger 2023). He emphasises that Catholic traditionalists hold problematic (e.g. anti-egalitarian or anti-Semitic) views and appear in problematic

settings, such as protests against Coronavirus measures, but they are rarely perceived by the wider society as being problematic.

In the course of the pandemic, civil society organisations such as the anti-racism initiative Zara documented a significant rise in anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim racism (Zara 2021, 2022). Equally, the Jewish community reported a new peak in anti-Semitic incidents (Österreichisches Parlament 2021). In addition to the use of controversial slogans during protests, as well as verbal and physical assaults, anti-Semitism online has become a rapidly growing phenomenon. Similarly, online expressions of hatred against Muslims rose dramatically (Sonderbeauftragter der Generalsekretärin des Europarats für Antisemitismus und Muslimfeindlichkeit\* und anderer Formen religiöser Intoleranz 2021).

## Conclusion

By 30 June 2023, all coronavirus measures, not least the COVID-19 Measures Act, had been repealed. Since then, COVID-19 has not been a reportable disease. In retrospect, the legal analysis shows that numerous aspects of religious life in the course of the pandemic were not resolved in a specifically legal manner but through cooperation with recognised religious communities. On the one hand, this can be seen as a successful dialogue; on the other hand, it also reveals certain legal uncertainties and questions about the inclusion of non-recognised communities. Certainly, the cooperation with 16 recognised religious communities led to a smoother process that also shows the advantages of a 'system of shared tasks'. The fact that Austria's Catholic-majority church partly coordinated coronavirus measures with the other legally acknowledged communities clearly helped the consensus orientation among political and religious authorities. Frictions existed but ran below the level of church leadership. Moreover, it has also become apparent that radicalised fringes of religious communities, as well as various individual forms of spirituality, were very present among protests against the coronavirus measures. In these protests, a very diverse mix of right-wing political forces and alternative religious and ultra-conservative Christian groups marched together to demonstrate their disagreement with governmental measures, as well as the restrictions that religious communities set independently.

The question of how to include those whose faith is not represented by a recognised community also arises. Religious communities have been treated differently from other institutions, e.g. art spaces. The legal proceedings around access to museums we described in the section on legal aspects have, in fact, become one of the most decisive court cases regarding religion and the pandemic. The lack of an extensive tradition of judicial activism with regard to defending the rights of religious groups might serve as an explanation here; another might be the search for consensus within the cooperation system of religion–state relations. This route is, however, not accessible to non-recognised religious groups.

Science scepticism is rather high in Austria. For example, only 47 per cent of the Austrian population consider scientists to be honest (29 per cent disagree and 24 per cent do not know; see European Commission 2021). This was also observable during the pandemic. Almost all larger religious communities made a big effort to promote scientific results, vaccination, and a science-based navigation through the pandemic. Just as in the general population, within religious communities, elites promoted scientific perspectives and were opposed by groups and individuals that criticised these elites in a populist manner. In the aftermath of the pandemic, political leaders, religious representatives, and scholars consensually emphasise the need for a social process to overcome the divisions that emerged in the course of this crisis (DerStandard.at 2023; Domradio.de 2022; Kurier.at 2023).

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