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The Christian Politics of Identity and the Making of Race in the German Welfare State

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Abstract

The Christian Caritas and Diakonie are Germany's largest welfare providers. They currently recruit abroad and in refugee shelters to fill staffing shortages in care. Yet, they also seek to preserve their organisations' Christian identity. Drawing on interviews with facility managers, my research explores how these initiatives shape institutional life in care homes. Specifically, I examine meanings attributed to conversion, notably in relation to Muslim staff. My analysis shows that Christians, nominal ('by heritage') or observant, are seen to 'naturally embody' care ethics and have privileged access to permanent contracts and leadership positions. The churches' politics of identity, I argue, racialises affiliation with Christianity into a category of belonging naturally inhabited by some, and only potentially – and always debatably – attainable for others. The analysis feeds into controversies about conversion in the sociology of race and extends scholarship on identity politics beyond its usual focus on minority or far-right activism.

Keywords

care work, Christianity, Germany, identity politics, institutional racism, Islamophobia, race, welfare state

Introduction

Several crisis narratives have dominated public debates in Germany in recent years: demographic ageing has intensified staffing shortages in care, which has become particularly notable during the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, the humanitarian crisis at Europe's borders has increased the number of applications for asylum.

The German state funds six welfare associations to deliver health and social care on its behalf. The majority of services, especially for older people, is provided by the

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Protestant Diakonie and the Catholic Caritas. Not only are the Christian associations the biggest suppliers, they are also the second largest employer after the state. Both have recently tried to mitigate the effects of one crisis with those of another: to fill labour gaps in care, they have actively recruited abroad, visited asylum shelters, and designed targeted training programmes for refugees and migrants.

Yet, the Catholic and Protestant churches also stress that a diversification of their workforce should not dilute their welfare associations' Christian profile. Rules and guidelines have been put in place to preserve their organisations' Christian identity. For instance, faith-based employers have been granted exemptions from the German equality law, which the churches interpret as a right to discriminate on grounds of religion – not only when filling pastoral positions, but also when hiring a care worker. The churches' guidelines state that non-Christians should *only* be hired in the absence of a Christian applicant, and leadership positions should remain reserved exclusively for Christians.

Thus, while Caritas and Diakonie increasingly recruit care workers from Asia or hire refugees who fled Muslim majority countries, they also nurture an institutional culture that stresses their organisations' Christian identity. This article is concerned with this Christian politics of identity. The analysis explores how the churches' employment criteria shape institutional life in care homes. Specifically, I examine how Christian identity is deployed and invoked, enacted and translated into everyday routines – especially in relation to 'non-Christian' staff.

The analysis draws on qualitative interviews with managers in Caritas and Diakonie care institutions across Germany. Due to the criteria for leadership positions, the sample included exclusively individuals with German-sounding names who self-identified as nominal or practising members of a Christian church. Respondents were invited to reflect on experiences with diversity and their selection criteria for staff. The data shows that their recruitment preferences varied considerably. Some managers endorsed the churches' hiring criteria, others considered them dated. Remarkably, a number of respondents reflected on conversion to Christianity in this context. As these accounts were particularly illustrative of the wider social meanings associated with Christian identity, they are the main focus of this article.

The scholarship on ethno-religious diversity prevalently regards Christian identity politics as expressions of the constitutional order emergent after the Second World War, which put faith-based providers in charge of welfare delivery (Jähnichen, 2016). The churches' role in society thereby features as a backdrop or 'opportunity structure' (e.g. Fetzer and Soper, 2005; Helbling, 2012). For instance, Kortmann (2020) has argued that legal exemptions for faith-based employers can be explained with their 'leading role as welfare providers'. Apart from the descriptively circular logic of this 'explanation', it analytically foregrounds *one* juncture in German history, the post-war period, while longer-durée historical events *and* more recent socio-economic developments are sidelined. This understanding also frames categories of belonging, such as Christian identity, as given and stable – regardless of, for instance, their evolving social meaning in German society, and the churches' active role in their making. Thus, institutionalised incentives to convert to Christianity feature as part of an 'assimilation' process to be completed by 'latecomers' to a 'Christian constitutional order, culture and society'. Relatedly, scholars of race regard possibilities of assimilation via conversion as 'a way out' of being

positioned as an ‘other’ and classify social hierarchies that allow such ‘permeability’ as proto- or not yet racist (Plümecke, 2014; Post, 2020).

This article further unpacks the assumptions underpinning these scholarly accounts. Beyond acknowledging that categories of belonging are socially constructed, I investigate how they are made and re-made, by whom, and to what effect (see also Lentin, 2020). This approach, as elaborated by Fassin (2017), combines the tools of genealogical inquiry with critical social theory’s focus on political and economic structures. Thus, rather than treating Christian identity as given, stable or frozen in time, I examine how it is being invoked, enacted, made, and re-made across historical and contemporary contexts – including through the meanings attributed to conversion.

To this end, I undertake a brief genealogical excursion into German colonialism and Nationalsocialism that reassesses accounts of conversion as a signifier of permeable community boundaries. I then examine two developments that underpin the churches’ current politics of identity: the ‘unchurching’ of German society, manifested in a continuing decline of membership, and the neoliberalisation of the German welfare state, which has put welfare suppliers into a competitive relationship. The following empirical discussion locates Christian identity politics and its institutional effects within their longer-durée and current socio-economic conditions of possibility.

This historical-contextual approach brings into view how the Christian politics of identity produces racial distinctions. To preserve their waning social influence, the churches promote the Christian profile of their welfare associations through performance indicators and contractual conditions. As a result, belonging to Christianity, be it nominal (‘by heritage’) or observant, bears material privileges, including access to permanent employment and leadership positions. For non-Christians, career progression (and at times also a permanent contract) is conditional upon conversion to Christianity. This reinforces a racialised division of labour: as quantitative research has documented, migrant workers tend to be over-represented in the care sector and in precarious contracts (see Khalil et al., 2020 for an overview of this wider trend).

However, the churches’ politics of identity not ‘only’ reinforce differential employment opportunities. The managers I interviewed, whether they endorsed or challenged the churches’ guidance, held value-based notions of the ‘good carer’ that drew on colonial ideas of the ‘other’ and were infused with neoliberal rationalities of the flexible worker. Christians were seen to ‘naturally embody’ the ethics of care, while ‘others’, Muslims in particular, were rendered ‘dubiously qualified’ and less able to care.

The churches’ employment rules, and their translation into everyday practices in welfare institutions, bolster self-representations of a superior Christian civilisation. Rather than signalling its permeability, the conditionality and wider social meanings attributed to conversion harden and naturalise the boundaries of Christian community. The churches’ politics of identity, I thus argue, racialises affiliation with Christianity into a superior category of belonging that is seen as naturally inhabited by some, and only potentially – and always debatably – attainable for others.

This argument draws on and feeds into discussions about conversion and the churches’ role in the German welfare state. It also contributes to scholarly debates about the politics of identity which have often focused on minoritised repertoires (Modood, 2020) or far-right activism and thereby left mainstream identity assertions understudied (Mondon and

Winter, 2020). Specifically, it offers a challenge to accounts that position mainstream, White or Christian identity politics as a politicised ‘reaction’ to minority politics or to ‘growing’ ethno-religious diversity. Instead, this article shows that Christian identity politics draws on a historically established action repertoire; that it is framed by the wider political economy; and that it is deployed to set racial boundaries that maintain privileges.

The Making and Racialisation of Categories of Belonging

I begin by theorising the concepts that inform my overall argument, including the politics of identity, racialisation, and racism’s function for historical and contemporary societies.

This article draws on and contributes to scholarship that not only acknowledges that categories of belonging are socially constructed but examines the histories and the politics of their making (Anderson, 2013; Lentin, 2020). Categories of belonging, such as ethnicity or nationality, shape how people relate to one another, how they self-scribe in terms of identity, and what opportunities they have. Yet, while they powerfully structure emotions and accounts of self, they are not ‘natural’. At various historical junctures, criteria of entry have set limits to who can and cannot belong (Anderson, 2013). Of course, minoritised groups, or those marked as not-belonging, talk back and get involved in (re-)negotiating collective identifications. Yet, identity politics should not exclusively be understood as an intervening activist repertoire. The setting of boundaries to belonging, often advanced by means of the law or institutions, also constitutes a politics of identity.

Under specific circumstances, categories of belonging can acquire a racial quality; for instance, rather than being thought of as fluid, evolving, and responsive to social circumstances, they harden into a form of difference along cultural, phenotypical or religious lines (Lentin, 2020). This process has been described as race-making, or racialisation. According to Murji and Solomos (2005: 14), racialisation involves the setting, naturalising and maintaining of group boundaries; the results are racial subjects that are then seen to reproduce themselves biologically, culturally, *or* economically. This categorising as different, Virdee (2021) notes, becomes racism when groups are hierarchically ordered, and differences are understood as immutable. Some scholars have argued that this does not apply when assimilation into the dominant group, for instance via conversion, is still possible (Plümecke, 2014; Post, 2020). I suggest we should not conflate immutability with inescapability; it can also be constituted by ambiguity. For instance, group membership can be seen as contingent upon the fulfilment of criteria whose accomplishment remains continuously in doubt. Across different historical and geographical contexts, as Goldberg (2009) reminds us, different somatic or cognitive traits have been fixed as inheritable or naturalised – including blood, skin-tone, genes, culture or religion. Thus, racialisation can, but does not necessarily involve the essentialisation of genes; it can naturalise cultural values, which are thereby imagined as ever the same, and as passed on from generation to generation. Orientalism, Antisemitism or anti-Muslim racism, for instance, harden culture and religious belonging into a form of difference (while also recurring to phenotype or genetics). Across various periods in European history, these repertoires of racism have attributed shared and/or idiosyncratic features to ‘Jews’ and ‘Muslims’ (Jansen and Meer 2020; Kalmar, 2012, 2019; Renton and Gidley, 2017; Sayyid and Vakil 2010).

Racism, however, not only rests on the naturalisation of characteristics, and the production of difference; it draws on these attributions to justify a differential distribution of symbolic and material resources (Hall, 1997). This has often manifested in a racialised division of labour. Historical examples include the exploitation of colonised populations, including through slavery, but also forced labour camps during National Socialism. The ‘outsourcing’ of free, cheap or precarious labour to populations racialised as other has played a key role in enabling the development of capitalism, European wealth, and welfare states (Bhambra and Holmwood, 2018; Virdee, 2021). Today, population groups racialised as ‘other’, for example migrant or the so called ‘guest-workers’ in Germany, continue to be regarded as more suited for and concentrated in low-paid occupations, under-represented in leadership positions, and more frequently exposed to psychological and/or physical harm (e.g. the murders of the extremist National Socialist Underground or Hanau).

So far, the literature has predominantly engaged with the role of states, policy makers or social movements in racialising categories of belonging. The role of the churches usually features as institutional opportunity structure (Helbling, 2012), or historical backdrop and influence (Jansen and Meer, 2020; Sayyid and Vakil, 2010).

The History of Christianity and the Making of Race

Recently, interdisciplinary literature has reflected on the agency of the Christian churches. Independently from one another, and by engaging with diverse historical and geographical contexts, scholars have documented a specific mechanism: in the pursuit of political and social influence, the churches have positively racialised Christendom, and thereby contributed to negatively racialising ‘others’.

For instance, Anidjar (2014) traced how the central place attributed to blood in Christian symbolism and rituals positioned Christendom as a racially distinct community from the Crusades onwards. While primarily ‘an inner and inward directed activity’, he notes, Christianity’s ‘collective self-fashioning’ rested on and was productive of ‘constructions of alterity’ (Anidjar, 2014: 39). Kalmar (2012) has shown how outward projections onto the ‘Islamic world’ sharpened the contours of a Christian territory and ‘people’ from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. He argued that Christendom crafted its self-image by outsourcing its own negative features and projecting them onto ‘others’. Robert Ericksen and Susannah Heschel (2004) exposed how the German Catholic and Protestant churches crafted their public profile against Judaism during the Nazi era. Thus, as Goldberg (2009: 263) put it, it was by sacralising and spiritually elevating their own community that the churches have contributed to the making of race. This literature reminds us that racialisation is rarely of demonic intent – rather, it often results from an exaltation of the self, and the prioritising of its significance, influence and reach, while the consequences for others are side-lined. Thus, without necessarily calling it such, this literature has elaborated on the role of Christian identity politics in race-making.

These studies have not been brought together to suggest that self-racialisation is specific to Christianity, or that it constitutes a historical continuity across time and space. Rather, the commonalities these scholars have identified indicate that the Christian churches have involved themselves in political projects that rested on racial distinctions and have played a role in their creation and sustenance.

Key to this process are the ways in which entry criteria into the Christian community have been set and defined. Nirenberg (2002), for instance, has shown how the conditioning of conversion during the Reconquista has contributed to hardening and essentialising belonging to Christianity in Europe. I shall therefore briefly examine the meanings attributed to conversion in two periods of German racial thinking, colonialism and Nationalsocialism.

In the colonial era, the churches advanced a specific form of identity politics. Christianisation was seen as spiritual-sensual encroachment into the 'heart of darkness' and a means of controlling the 'unruly heathen wildness' (van der Heyden, 2011: 233). It counted as moral obligation to 'save souls and further their civilization', which in turn legitimated colonial rule (Habermas, 2016: 54). A mission was charged with pedagogical objectives, including the local population's 'education to work' and their 'cultural assimilation' into Christian values (Bade, 1984: 15). Conversion signified the adoption of 'modern' cultural practices, including 'bourgeois ideas of cleanliness and morality, European codes of dress and gender roles, economic paradigms and models of adjudication and state organization' (Habermas, 2016: 50). Entering the Christian community stood for significantly more than embracing a religious belief system; it signified the habituation of superior values and behaviours. And upon the completion of this process, phenotypical markers often signalled continued 'difference'. Belonging to Christianity thus stood for moral commitment to an advanced civilisation.

In the Nazi era, affiliation with Christianity was distinctly racialised. While mainly drawing on scientific justifications, Hitler also referred to the Aryan race as 'divine creation' (Plümecke, 2014: 153). The boundaries of community were drawn along genetic lines: 'German blood rather than confession' defined who belonged to the German nation (Plümecke, 2014: 151). According to the Nuremberg Laws, Jews could not be citizens, regardless of attempts to change confession. Yet, in occupied Poland, for instance, the entry criteria into 'Germanness' were more ambiguous – here, evidence of 'loyalty' and 'cultural practice' could suffice (Wolf, 2017). The churches also contributed to further refining the criteria for conversion, by no means in unison. The Protestant church, for instance, was divided on the question of religious mission: The 'German Christians' opposed Jewish conversion to avoid the de-purification of 'Germanness' (Eriksen and Heschel, 2004), while the 'Confessing Church' supported the idea of promulgation and appealed to parishes to convert Jews to 'save' them. The Catholic Church sealed its right to proselytise in the 1933 'Reichskonkordat'. Thus, the churches were split over the question of whether being Jewish constituted an inescapable marker or not; Christianity's superiority was orthodoxy. In the 'Third Reich', belonging to Christianity materialised in projections of purity as genetic alliance, with limited and ambiguous possibilities of perforation.

In these historical contexts, theology and the law intertwined in framing the entry conditions into the Christian community. During colonialism, Christianisation was synonymous with civilising efforts. Although conversion was attainable via 'assimilation', it could only be acquired by undergoing substantial processes of self-transformation in terms of lifestyle and value orientation. Often, but not always, phenotypical markers signalled continuing ambiguity of belonging. In the Nazi era, conversion was either associated with the possibility of escaping persecution or ruled out as a form of

‘contamination’. Here too, the inescapability of religious difference was contested. Yet, that did not mean that community boundaries were permeable.

Even when conversion was possible, it was highly conditional and stood for more than ‘just’ changing religion. In these historical contexts, conversion offered a means of disciplining affect, re-orienting behaviour, enacting salvation or disguising ascribed inferiority. Thus, it was the conditionality of belonging, the social meanings associated with conversion, and its ambiguity that hardened affiliation with Christianity into a phenotypical, genetic, and/or cultural difference.

In both examples, the politics of Christian identity was shaped by the political-economic conditions of the time. Before I discuss how these historical archives resonate today, I shall briefly sketch the political-economic landscape that frames the churches’ current politics of identity.

The Post-War German Welfare State

Faith-based welfare organisations were established in the 19th century to enact the churches’ charitable duty and further the ‘rechristianization’ of society (Jähnichen, 2016: 47). Their work grew in importance after the World Wars, as the state’s resources were scarce (Gabriel, 2016). In the 1950s, this arrangement was formalised and the state funded six associations, including Caritas and Diakonie, to deliver welfare on its behalf. A paragraph of the German constitution, carried over from the Weimar Republic, guarantees these faith-based organisations’ self-determination. The churches interpret this as their right to regulate their employment relations independently from ‘state interference’. In practice, this has meant that their staff are not allowed to join a trade union, that they preferably hire Christians, and that only church members can take up leadership positions.

The ‘Unchurched’ of German Society

Since the formalisation of this welfare regime, however, the societal playing field has changed. Since the 1960s, religious affiliation has been in continuous decline. Caritas and Diakonie had to become more ‘worldly’: from the 1960s onwards, the nuns who delivered care in residential facilities were replaced by lay professionals. The churches narrate this erosion of their traditional milieu as a loss of integrative capacity and societal influence (Gabriel, 2016). The re-unification of Germany in the 1990s reinforced this trend, as 70% of East Germans were not affiliated religiously.

While membership has been shrinking, the churches’ role in the delivery of public welfare has grown. Over the last decades, the numbers of staff employed by Caritas and Diakonie have steadily risen (Schroeder, 2017: 37–44). The churches’ welfare activities receive strong popular support. Across various surveys substantial majorities, including respondents who are not religiously affiliated, feel that the church should be ‘involved in helping those in need’, think the church ‘should run welfare facilities’ (Schroeder, 2017: 144, 157), and want Christianity ‘to play a more important role in society’ (Rommelspacher, 2017: 796). The churches’ social and political influence, no longer justifiable on the basis of their membership, now largely relies on their leading role in the delivery of welfare.

The unchurched of German society has had two effects: the self-evidence with which their welfare organisations were considered Christian is no longer a given, as theologically trained staff has been replaced by lay professionals, and the churches' welfare activities have become a main source of their reputation and social significance. The churches react to these developments with a politics of identity: they seek to preserve their organisation's distinct Christian profile by asserting and further emphasising their preference to hire Christians. In this process, Christian values, rather than religious practice, increasingly move to the fore in definitions of Christian identity. This trend, not unique to Germany, has been described as 'cultural re-Christianization' (Rommelspacher, 2017).

The Marketisation of Welfare

Since the 1990s, the European Commission and German governments have advanced a set of reforms that involved the privatisation of public services. The 1995 Care Act gave near-equal status to private care suppliers, introducing market competition between semi-public and private providers. Caritas and Diakonie, the major players in this sector, continue to receive state subsidies, but have been thrown into competition with profit-oriented enterprises (Schroeder, 2017: 64). The new playing field pushed them to undergo institutional reforms, including the rationalisation, merger and closure of facilities, and the introduction of care quality audits. This often involved the replacement of theologically trained management by business administration professionals. As their staff are not unionised, Caritas and Diakonie are able to pay wages below the national average and outsource care work to agencies with precarious working conditions (Heinze, 2016: 33). When the federal trade union Verdi was about to achieve an agreement on raising the minimum wage for care work in 2021, it was the Caritas' vote and the Diakonie's abstention that prevented this settlement (Parnack, 2021). Arguing that a sector wide minimum wage would infringe upon their right to self-determination, the faith-based associations secured their position in the competitive welfare market.

Yet, survey data shows that the public continues to associate Christian providers with particularly reliable, non-profit and community-oriented services (Schroeder, 2017: 75). The Christian profile thus endows Caritas and Diakonie with 'a unique selling point' in the welfare sector.

To the churches, the neoliberalisation of welfare and the professionalisation of leadership positions contributed to a further erosion of their organisations' Christian profile. Yet, it is precisely the Christian 'label' that secures their popular reputation in the competitive market. The churches respond with identity politics, and the ever-growing determination to stress their associations' Christian profile. Christian identity, still theologically framed, thereby acquires yet another layer of social meaning, and increasingly stands for a 'corporate identity' associated with high-quality care.

It is against the background of these trends that Diakonie's and Caritas' umbrella associations engaged in national and supranational lobbying activities which secured them exemptions from the German Equal Treatment Act 2006 (Lewicki, 2014). The Christian politics of identity has thus successfully shaped German legal frameworks. So far, German courts have upheld the churches' and their welfare organisations' preferential hiring of Christians (Lewicki, 2014). The European Court of Justice, however, argues

this can only apply to pastoral positions. The following section now explores the effects of this contested politics of identity on institutional life in the German welfare state.

Methodological Considerations

Before I discuss my findings, I shall outline key methodological considerations that shaped this research.

Residential care was chosen as a case study, as the Christian associations provide the majority of services in this area (Schroeder, 2017: 40–46). I contacted regional Caritas and Diakonie branches in the North and South, East and West of Germany and asked to be put in touch with care homes prepared to reflect on experiences with diversity. The regional associations could thus showcase their ‘model’ organisations in relation to diversity management. Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with care home managers between 2016 and 2017. Due to the aforementioned criteria for leadership positions, the sample included exclusively individuals with German-sounding names who self-identified as practising or, in a few cases, nominal members of a Christian church.

My topic guide included questions about the ethical principles underpinning respondents’ work, their understanding of equal treatment, their hiring procedures, and their experiences with staff of diverse backgrounds. Interviews were anonymous and lasted roughly an hour. Most interviewees related to me as an academic observer and outsider to their organisation, but as an insider in other respects: As my German is accent-free, respondents seemed to perceive me as a fellow ‘German’, ‘fellow Christian’ (nominal or otherwise) and ‘highly educated professional’. I had a good rapport with most interviewees and encountered them as individuals who deeply cared about their staff and residents’ well-being and who showed engaged interest in my research. My passing as an ‘insider’, while a distinct biographical experience, is underpinned by a more complex positionality that involves a precarious migration from Poland to Germany in early childhood, and a privileged migration as a postgraduate student to the UK. Notably, the Christian welfare associations shaped both, as it was the Caritas that ran the refugee shelter that my family spent its first year in Germany in, and the Protestant churches’ scholarship foundation (‘Evangelisches Studienwerk Villigst’) who later funded my doctoral studies in Britain. One could say that a Christian background, in addition to visual markers such as blond hair and blue eyes, contributed to putting me on the trajectory of a ‘well-adjusted immigrant’. This does not erase gendered, classed and biographical inequalities resulting from migration, but it points to the ways in which instituted Christianity has a stake in shaping possibilities of belonging.

Yet in this study, this experience framed my relationship to my respondents more than theirs to me. Given that the questions I put to research participants made my concern with the politics of equality rather obvious, I was surprised how many respondents openly and ‘comfortably’ expressed racist views (see also Lewicki, 2020). In such instances, I struggled with my role as empathetic listener. Often, I decided against interrupting the flow of the respondent’s narrative and managed the discomfort of passively ‘sitting through’ these statements by debriefing with my research assistant afterwards. This was ethically ambiguous, as, on the one hand, respondents shared their opinions ‘bona fide’ with an ‘other in disguise’, whose interpretation of their statements as racist

they might not find agreeable. On the other hand, I was thrown into the position of a silent witness who, qua their empathetic attention, contributes to perpetuating racist talk. Thus, power circulated in diverse ways in these encounters, and the conversation invoked complex and fluid solidarities.

When revisiting transcripts during data analysis, I often related to respondents with the same affective mix of appreciation for their dedication to their responsibilities, and disturbance about its absence in relation to staff they positioned as ‘other’. During analysis, responses were organised into intersecting themes. I noted that several respondents mentioned ‘baptism’ or ‘conversion’ in relation to the type of contract an employee could attain, which led me to read up on historical meanings of conversion. This approach to discourse analysis, while inspired by Foucault’s (e.g. 2004) concern with the historical trajectories of ideas, is nevertheless largely focused on the construction of meaning in the present, specifically on institutional practices and their role in the making of categories of belonging. While personal interaction matters, it is also important to locate these findings within their wider social context (Fassin, 2017). This is not to deny the responsibility of the managers in perpetuating racism, but to also consider the conditions that frame their narratives and decisions.

Christian Identity in Institutional Life

While there are noteworthy differences between the Catholic Caritas and the Protestant Diakonie, this analysis focuses on their employment preferences – which they often jointly defend. These employment policies potentially affect staff from various backgrounds. Yet, as Islam and Muslims have a specific prominence in public debates, respondents often reflected on their experiences with this group.

For instance, I asked interviewees about the criteria they applied when hiring new staff. Institutional practices turned out to vary considerably. Some regional branches of the churches had recently ‘allowed’ the hiring of ‘non-Christians’. In some places, this meant that ‘non-Christian’ staff worked under the same contractual conditions as staff affiliated with a Christian church. Other institutions employed non-Christians on a temporary contract. In some instances, this meant that Muslim staff worked in precarious contracts for decades, while their colleagues, committedly or ‘formally’ associated with Christianity, were in secure employment. In other regions, care homes were strictly required to hire Christians only.

Commitment to the prescribed recruitment criteria also varied across institutions: some facility managers upheld the rules keenly, others stuck to them but expressed their disapproval, others again reported that they transgressed them, often for diverse reasons. The diversity of institutional practices, and the varying levels of commitment indicate that the preferential hiring of Christians was by no means applied universally. Yet, it required either an explicit loosening of the criteria by the regional branch of the church or a lack of compliance on the part of the manager for non-Christian staff to work under equal contractual conditions; in many places non-Christian members of staff were precariously employed and/or unable to apply for leadership positions. This illustrates that, even though the Christian churches’ rules invoke a diverse spectrum of

responses, the normative guidance contributes to normalising and attributing superior status to belonging to Christianity.

In their reflections on the prescribed hiring criteria, a few respondents brought up religious conversion. Views on this issue varied considerably too. Common positions have been grouped into three categories, which I call the ‘expansive’, the ‘nominal’ and the ‘schoolmaster’ narrative.

The manager of a Caritas care home, for instance, stressed: ‘We will take anyone!’ He took pride in Catholicism’s internationalism and hired staff from all over the globe. He actively recruited in Catholic countries such as Poland and approached refugee communities who had recently arrived from Syria. He employed non-Christians across a range of roles, with the exception of leadership positions. To him, this offered a chance to expand Christianity’s reach:

Facilities manager, large city, West of Germany (Caritas): On my level, its necessary, on the level of leadership responsibility, and just below that too, there we prefer to hire Christians. On the operative level we are absolutely open to anyone, because, because I think that the really big players, the large Christian providers, they can’t get around obliging their welfare organisations to implementing their missionary duty. That’s how I would put it . . . If it takes its mission seriously, the church will join in. We have so many employees, who, through their job, can get closer to the church. Taking this seriously, and living our mission offers a great opportunity. (Quotes translated by the author)

This quote illustrates one ‘type’ of narrative, which I call ‘expansive’, held by a respondent who embraces his institution’s Christian profile as a missionary tool. He breaks with the requirement to hire Christians in the hope the church will join him in reaching out to non-Christians. In this understanding, leadership positions are reserved for Christians so they can pull ‘others’ into Christianity’s fold. This narrative glorifies the mainly colonial history of Christianity’s global spread and celebrates a neoliberal vision of an open global care market. The rest of the world, in this vision, provides a reservoir of cheap labour, to be civilised further by means of Christianisation. The narrative shows no reflexivity about the asymmetries resulting from a systematic reliance on workers from the global South and East to deliver care in the West of Europe. While labour migration allows sustaining families via remittances, international care chains also often imply personal sacrifice for workers who leave their parents or children behind to deliver professional care abroad. Care work often is precarious and poorly paid, and in the case of a Christian employer, involves limited labour rights. Under such asymmetrical conditions, conversion can hardly be reduced to the power of spiritual persuasion. This expansive vision is racially charged in its instrumentalisation of the ‘other’, who is to move across borders to do the dirty work – but will be prohibited from career progression unless they convert. In this narrative, carers are seen as mobile workers, objects of salvation and potential vessels of Christianity’s expansion.

While such expansive enthusiasm was espoused by some respondents, another narrative was similarly if not more ‘common’. I call this the ‘nominal’ type, often held by a respondent who viewed the preferential hiring of Christians with a critical eye:

Facilities Manager, rural area, South of Germany (Diakonie): Our institution is based on the idea of Christian charity. Specific about us is that each employee has to be a member of one of the Christian churches.

- Interviewer:* And this is seen through?
- FM:* Yes, that is being enforced, we don't employ people who do not belong to the church . . . If you don't belong to a church, you'll just have to convert.
- Interviewer:* So do you get people who convert?
- FM:* Yes, we had one person . . . She was Alevi, and was born here, and was already third generation, and couldn't feel too much attachment to this [her faith], but she converted to Christianity because of her job, and she says clearly that that was her reason.
- Interviewer:* So does she now live as a Christian?
- FM:* (irritated) Oh, well, there is no way I can verify this, can I?
- Interviewer:* I am not suggesting you should, I am just curious.
- FM:* That is somehow. . . well, how shall I put it. . . I can't quite see why the employer should have the right to prescribe somebody's faith, so if you ask me, this understanding is redundant now.

The respondent's indignation at my prompt shows his discomfort about his employee's need to convert to be offered a permanent contract after years of service. He considers the idea of taking an interest in her commitment even more out of line. Her conversion, to him, is a formality, a hoop she jumped through, justifiable by her waning 'attachment' over the course of generations. Belonging to Christianity, to this respondent, is a bureaucratic formality, a 'piece of paper'. Those formally affiliated with Christianity through their birth can attain a permanent contract without ever seeing a church from the inside, and those not born into this privilege only have to sign on the dotted line. This narrative reduces conversion to a bureaucratic hurdle, an extra-requirement for those marked as 'other', easier to overcome for the 'well-adjusted'. The recourse to his employee's assimilation shows that his unease, in this instance, largely is down to what to him is an illegitimate invasion of religious criteria into the workplace, while his employee's flexibility in 'leaving behind' her 'otherness' made it easier to navigate the intrusion. The benefits of a permanent contract, in a neoliberal logic, can be enjoyed by the flexible employee who aligns their performance with the prescribed indicators. The nominal narrator would highlight that faith had no bearing on qualifications and consider the churches' criteria to be unsustainable. While critical of the formal requirement, the narrative does little to challenge the devaluation of his employee's affiliation, whether she embraces the Alevi faith or not. Notably, it shows no recognition of the significance expressions of belonging can acquire in exile, especially over generations, and little reflexivity of the symbolic violence underpinning the choice between precarious work or leaving a feature of one's identity behind. Her 'waning attachment' is associated with her adaption to 'superior values', and resonant of a colonial framing of conversion. Both, the conditioning of conversion – and the respondent's street-level bureaucratic implementation – reproduce a hierarchical distinction between positively racialised Christendom and negatively racialised 'others', which draws on colonial archives of racism and is infused with neoliberal performance criteria of adaptability and flexibility.

The third narrative, which I call the 'schoolmaster' type, lies in between the previous strategies, thus between breaking the rule in order to proselytise, and implementing it

reluctantly. It involves the preparedness to hire non-Christians who are to be subjected to what this respondent describes as ‘morality training’:

Facilities Manager, small town, South of Germany (Diakonie): we have had some baptisms here in our institution, but there is another strategy too . . . so this an act of necessity really . . . because we have less and less staff, but are reliant on recruiting specifically skilled employees, and we do not want to cut ourselves off from the labour market, we say ok, one has to try to convey the values, which people used to bring to their roles through their faith, we develop these values in morality workshops, and see whether that can also work.

The interview took place in a region where the church has explicitly allowed the hiring of non-Christians on various contracts, with the exception of leadership positions. Non-Christian staff are, however, obliged to undergo training sessions to absorb the Christian ‘value codex’. This training is often referred to as ‘belated Christian socialisation’ (‘nachholende christliche Sozialisation’, see also Schroeder, 2017: 60). This narrative considers training as an ‘alternative’ to conversion, but equivalent in terms of the objective, namely cultivating the ‘appropriate’ value orientation. When prompted about the kinds of values to be conveyed in such workshops, the respondent gave the example of ‘respect for human dignity’. Due to its systematic violation in the Nazi era, human dignity is prominently protected in the first article of the German constitution. The principle goes back to the Stoa and Judaism. Yet, in the respondent’s narrative, respect of human dignity is assumed as given in *Christians* and yet to be nurtured in non-Christians. Thus, the ‘morality workshops’ are reminiscent of the civilising meaning attributed to Christianisation in colonial contexts. In other parts of the interview, the respondent, like many others, made explicit that he considered Muslims in particular to hold ‘very different values’. The message sent to the employee is an invitation to value-based ‘self-improvement’. Here too, the colonial rationale merges with a neoliberal one: the employee is expected to complete further work on the self to comply with care quality standards and the organisation’s corporate identity. While there is ‘hope’ that the ‘other’ can be civilised, the respondent is also not sure whether ‘this can work’, expressing scepticism about the degree to which ‘value aberration’ can be overcome. Basic principles of care ethics are framed as naturally ‘embodied’ by Christians, yet lacking in non-Christians, Muslims in particular. The employer’s insistence on their regular transmission contributes to positively racialising the boundaries of Christian identity and to placing the ‘other’ outside this ‘community of value’ (Anderson, 2013). Here too, precarious working conditions create pressures that hardly render the engagement with the prescribed ‘morality’ voluntary.

These examples illustrate that the politics of identity is by no means translated into a unitary approach but invokes a diverse spectrum of institutional practices. Yet, in the cases discussed above, this spectrum of diverging responses to the churches’ employment criteria, including varying modes of implementation *and* transgression, contribute to the crafting of an institutional culture that perpetuates racial distinctions. Non-Christian staff, Muslims in particular, were more likely to be employed precariously, to undergo ‘belated Christian socialisation’, or to be encouraged to convert to Christianity to obtain a permanent contract or apply for promotion. The churches’ guidelines and their

implementation furthermore contribute to framing Christendom as the embodiment of care ethics. The racialised subject reproduces itself culturally via a transmission of values; otherness is not 'inescapably' marked and can 'potentially' be 'overcome' – but at a high price, and with ambiguous outcome. For those who are assumed to hold fixed values and pass these on from generation to generation, conversion offers the chance to demonstrate their willingness to assimilate – although it remains in question whether this process can ever be complete. This also reflects the neoliberal vision of an employee who moves across borders to take on 'dirty' work, engages in continuous self-improvement and flexibly adapts to the prescribed performance criteria. Thus, expectations of adaptability can also have racialising effects.

The Christian Politics of Identity and the Making of Race

In this article, I undertook an examination of the Christian politics of identity – including its histories, social conditions, and effects on institutional life in the German welfare state.

The analysis is informed by scholarship that not only acknowledges that categorisations of belonging are socially constructed, but examines the histories, social conditions and politics of their making. Thus, rather than referring to Christian identity as static or frozen in time, I examined how it has been invoked and deployed across key periods in German history, traced the social meanings it has acquired in post-war Germany, and examined how it is being enacted in everyday institutional life in the welfare sector today. Specifically, this article engaged with the wider social significance attributed to conversion, and the ways in which the conditioning of entry criteria has contributed to hardening the boundaries of the Christian community.

During colonialism, Christianisation contributed to stabilising colonial governance. Christian identity could be acquired, but only by undergoing substantial processes of self-transformation in terms of lifestyle and value orientation. Conversion was racially charged, not only because the completeness of assimilation remained continuously in doubt, but also because it offered a means of disciplining affect, re-orienting behaviour and nurturing superior values and codes of conduct.

In the Nazi era, Christian identity politics aided the building of an 'Aryan Third Reich' and helped to preserve the churches' significance within it. The Christian community materialised in projections of purity as genetic alliance. Conversion was equated with contamination, but also with the enactment of salvation or the disguise of inferiority. Thus, it was the inescapability from being placed outside Germanness, but *also* the conditionality, the spectrum of contested meanings and the ambiguity of conversion that racialised community boundaries along religious, cultural, and genetic lines.

Today, Christian identity politics secures the churches' and their faith-based associations' pole position in an unchurched society and increasingly competitive welfare market. Christian identity thereby becomes associated with a value-based corporate identity that stands for ethical care. Conversion offers a means of preserving Christianity's waning significance; alternatively, it features as a bureaucratic hurdle, easily overcome by the well-assimilated employee, or as a pedagogical tool that nurtures care ethics. While Christian identity is attainable, it involves moving across borders, leaving features of one's identity behind, or providing evidence of one's value orientation and caring qualities

(which, however, still remain in doubt). Here too, the wider social meanings attributed to conversion, its conditionality and ambiguity, are indicative of its racialisation.

Thus, my analysis challenges accounts within the sociology of race that regard the possibility to convert as signifying permeable community boundaries, and thus the absence of racism. In the historical and contemporary examples discussed in this article, it was the cumulative effect of the wider social meanings of conversion that positively racialised belonging to Christianity. Thus, racism does not necessarily rely on the inescapability of boundaries; their mutability can be ambiguous. High hurdles conditioning entry into a community, and their wider social meanings and effects also create and sustain social hierarchies and privileges.

Furthermore, my findings have implications for the scholarship on the politics of diversity, which often reduces the role of the churches to a 'historical backdrop' or 'institutional opportunity structure'. This article has highlighted the evolving social position of the Christian churches, but also their agency and active role in shaping public notions of Christian identity. This is not to suggest that self-elevation and self-racialisation is unique to instituted Christianity, or a specific Christian legacy. I also do not claim that the churches' necessarily act consciously or calculatedly. Yet, as a range of studies have noted across space and time, the churches have repeatedly resorted to the politics of identity to secure their own significance, spread and reach. Currently, their identity assertions project a self-image as benefactors who embody the ethics of care. Yet, considering *how* this image is crafted, the churches *also* emerge as agents who anxiously cling to privileges at the expense of devaluing and denying non-Christian ethics, lifestyles, and caring commitments.

Christian identity politics, therefore, is not best conceptualised as a response to social diversity: as the analysis illustrated, it re-enacts well-established action repertoires, draws on historical archives, and is driven by wider political-economic trends. The interview data showed that the current racialisation of Christian identity borrows from colonial (and to a lesser extent from Nationalsocialist) archives,¹ but at the same time is, in its emphasis on adaptability and flexibility, distinctly shaped by neoliberal logics. The politics of identity thereby produces and maintains racial distinctions, but also a racialised division of labour. Despite the welfare state's growing reliance on migrants to deliver its services, they are more likely to work precariously, and, unless they are Christians, face high hurdles for career progression.

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Note

1. This prevalence is likely to be related to the German state's politics of memory, which has given more attention to National Socialist ideas of race and less to colonial legacies.

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