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Discussions about Atheism and Religion in the Austrian Communist Party (KPÖ) between 1945 and 1990

Dirk Schuster

1. Introduction

There is surprisingly little research literature on the Austrian Communist Party (*Kommunistische Partei Österreichs*; KPÖ). The work done so far comes from party officials, members, or it is limited to the time of the Austrian corporate state (*Österreichischer Ständestaat*), during which the party was a resistance organisation. Unsurprisingly, due to the lack of systematic research, the topics of religion and atheism have not yet been addressed in relation to the KPÖ's ideology and programme. As one of three parties of the provisional government immediately after the Second World War, and given that it served in parliament until 1955, such a failure to observe the party and its stance on the subject of religion/atheism is quite astonishing in a predominantly Catholic country like Austria.

1.1. Atheism as an Object of Investigation by Religious Studies

Dealing with the meaning or function of atheism in the ideology of a communist party (here, the KPÖ) from the perspective of Religious Studies is a research topic scarcely encountered within the said field. In fact, atheism, albeit not frequently treated as such, is a highly relevant subject for the scholar of Religious Studies.¹ As Ulrich Berner (2011: 388) has pointed out using the example of what is known as New Atheism—like the theses of Richard Dawkins—then it can be seen as an object of Religious Studies,

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¹ In 1995, Gebhard Löhr already argued for and against the inclusion of atheism in the field of Religious Studies, where he rightly contradicts the equation of atheism with non-religion (Löhr 1995).

starting with a reflection on how the concept of religion is used, and a discussion of the underlying religious theory in order to reconstruct the inner-religious discourse that reveals the diversity of positions within a religious tradition. This results in the possibility of a differentiated opinion on the theses of religious criticism insofar as they relate to the interpretation of religious phenomena and the explanation of historical processes.

Contrarily, in regard to the “scientific atheism” of the Marxist-Leninist imprint, Religious Studies and its methods and theories can be employed to inquire about the ideological meaning of atheistic ideas in the communist ideology and the reactions towards them. This is of importance in relation to Communism—and applicable as well to National Socialism and Fascism—given that theological interpretations in particular misleadingly use terms like “substitute religion” (*Ersatzreligion*) or “replacement for religion” (*Religionsersatz*). However, several problems occur:

1) The conceptually utterly unclear and inflationary use of terms such as “substitute religion.”

2) The interpretation of atheism per se, which is often carried out from a theological perspective and frequently involves its equation with non-religion. This means that the term “atheism” has no clear demarcation.²

3) Such studies often have no methodological system; that is, statements on the part of communist representatives and followers of atheism are merely reproduced without questioning their meaning within the ideological worldview of Communism.³

More specifically, such studies do not question whether discussions about atheism within communist parties had the internal relevance that is often assumed in retrospect. Based on Ulrich Berner it can be argued that Religious Studies has the task of reconstructing ideological discourses from within totalitarian political concepts that are related to religion, atheism, and worldview. Only with the help of such a reconstruction and in connection with the analysis of real, practiced religious policies of totalitarian regimes can statements be made about the possible functions of religion or atheism. In this context, ideology should not be interpreted as a rigid system on the basis of which all decisions are made. Similar to the turn towards practice in Religious Studies, lived political practice must be included in every analysis, because everyday political life often finds itself engaged in a number of tensions with ideological convictions (Gould-Davies 1999). In this respect, one

2 For a differentiation between atheism and non-religion, see Lee 2012.

3 The work of Alfred Hoffmann (2000), which lacks any systematic, historical embedding or definition of terms, has to be regarded as an extreme example of the criticisms listed here.

must also always ask about the internal ideological meanings and considerations of discourses about religion or atheism. For example, there are frequent attempts (see, e.g., Wallmann 2017) to reconstruct an alleged religious policy of National Socialism with the help of Alfred Rosenberg's (1893–1946) *Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts* (The Myth of the Twentieth Century; Rosenberg 1930). It is completely overlooked, however, that Rosenberg had to publish his book privately, the leading National Socialists and Adolf Hitler paid no attention to it at all, and Rosenberg had almost no political influence by 1934 at the latest (Rosenberg 2015; Piper 2007). If, instead, one analyses the actual religious policy (or, better, the religious politics) of the Nazi regime (Schuster 2015), it quickly becomes clear that Rosenberg's ideology had no influence whatsoever. A similar statement can also be made about the significance of atheism within the Soviet-type of Marxism-Leninism: such "atheism" should not be overestimated, nor should it be understood as stringent and clear in terms of content; on the contrary, it should be examined in relation to regional and national characteristics.

1.2. Marxism-Leninism, Atheism, and Scientism under Soviet Influence

The October Revolution of 1917 in Russia and the massive expansion of the rule of the Soviet Union over large parts of Eastern, Southeast, and Central Europe as a result of the Second World War led to the consolidation of a political system in the countries of the so-called Eastern Bloc in which Marxism-Leninism had been elevated to an ideological worldview. As a result, the established Christian churches in those states were subject to restrictive measures, although the Bolsheviks did not pursue an anti-religious policy in the very beginning. It was only from 1929 onwards that the Soviet state took action against religious institutions and representatives. Thus, as Johannes Gleixner rightly remarks, it is not possible to formulate a master narrative of Soviet Socialism; rather, it is always necessary to consider the various institutions and organisations inside and outside the state (Gleixner 2017: 147).

The interpretation of religion (e.g., Anderson 1994) which prevailed throughout the 1920s—and at the latest with the establishment of the scientific atheism of a Marxist-Leninist bent in the 1950s—was ultimately based on Karl Marx's (1818–1883) functionalist interpretation (see Horii 2017; Kadenbach 1970). According to this interpretation, religion is not based on the existence of a transcendental deity or something of the sort; rather, it is to be understood solely as a social invention for the exploitation and oppression

of the broad masses by the ruling class. In this vein, the central functions of religion are the denial of human dignity and individual abilities, as well as the creation of an illusory belief system designed to impel people to serve and accept the social status quo. Due to the historical materialism on which Marx based his theory, and which inevitably predicted the establishment of Communism, religion would lose its central function and naturally disappear if the class differences were abolished in the new communist society.

The respective rulers and Marxist theoreticians had to realise at an early stage that despite the establishment of a socialist regime, religious ideas did not disappear among the population. As a result, there was an expansion of anti-religious propaganda (Grossman 1973), which was replaced in the late 1950s by the establishment of a scientific atheism based on “faith in science” (Tesař 2019; Smolkin-Rothrock 2014: 171). Enlightening the population with the help of scientific knowledge, it was assumed, would also remove the last remnants of religious beliefs from society (Kieserling 2004: 160).

According to the ideas of the socialist representatives, scientism had the task of rationally interpreting all developments in nature and society, which gave science the exclusive interpretational authority (e.g., Schuster and Vorpahl 2020). This automatically resulted in a competitive situation with religions, and given the geographical context, particularly with Christian interpretations. According to Thomas Schmidt-Lux (2008: 125), scientism in the Soviet sphere of power thus became a totalitarian worldview with the exclusive right to both interpret and give meaning to the world.

Although the individual nation-states in the Eastern Bloc had to obey the Soviet leadership’s stipulations at the political level, the area of religious policy allowed for special national routes (Buchenau 2015). Marxism-Leninism and the associated postulate of the death of religion in socialism remained untouched, but at times the emphasis on atheistic ideas as well as the way religious groups were dealt with—e.g., Christian churches—differed strongly. In addition, it must be noted that religious policies in the countries of the Eastern Bloc changed significantly in the period between 1945 and 1990, which is why a master narrative about the importance of atheism and the treatment of religions in the Soviet sphere of influence is fundamentally impossible.

In contrast, after 1945, the situation in the non-Soviet controlled countries of Central and Western Europe was completely different: communist parties, controlled by the Soviet Union, were established in almost all countries. However, these parties had to face democratic elections and thus had no power position supported by Soviet occupation troops, like in the countries of the Eastern Bloc. In the first two decades after the end of the Second World War, the new rulers in the Eastern Bloc launched a broad wave of propaganda

against religion for the “scientific education” of the population (see, e.g., Rimmel 2015: 360-361; Malycha and Winters 2009: 55; examples of such propaganda are given in Gurjew 1958; Klohr 1958 and 1964; Mädicke 1961). This was not possible in countries like Austria due to the lack of a communist power base.

Due to the Soviet influence on the KPÖ,⁴ the present study asks to what extent scientific atheism shaped the ideology of the KPÖ up until the collapse of the Soviet Union. For example, in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*; SED) was able to advance the development and dissemination of atheistic ideas through its unrestricted position of power.⁵ The KPÖ, on the contrary, was never able to do so due to its lack of political power.⁶ In this respect, a question that needs to be addressed is the following: How did the Austrian communists position themselves against religion and to what extent argumentative parallels can be established with respect to the scientific atheism of Marxist-Leninist imprint?⁷

The discussion of religion among communist representatives finds its relevance in the positioning of Marxist-Leninist ideology in relation to religious ideas. In this context, religion is to be understood as an integral part of society and subject to various legitimating processes. It is its own symbolic universe which offers theoretical and practical answers to existential problems (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 114). Religion integrates every sector of the institutional order and all human experiences in a comprehensive reference system. In this article I examine whether the KPÖ offered alternative interpretations of the world and what significance these interpretations had for the whole party's ideology. Such competition (see also Iannaccone 1992) between symbolic universes with their different levels of knowledge ultimately prompts

4 A current research overview is provided by Mueller 2017 and Mugrauer 2013.

5 For the establishment of the Chair for Scientific Atheism at the University of Jena in 1963 as one example, see Schuster 2017.

6 In the Austrian National Council elections, the KPÖ held almost six per cent of the votes until the mid-1950s, a share that gradually decreased in the following decades. The figures for the Austrian National Council elections since 1949 are available at <http://www.demokratiezentrum.org/fileadmin/media/data/wahlergebnisse.pdf> (accessed: April 9, 2020).

7 The basic study by Thomas Schmidt-Lux (2008) is used here for the definition of scientific atheism.

questions concerning the power to interpret social problems and their solutions (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 126-127).⁸

1.3. Method

One major challenge in researching the history of the KPÖ is the transmission of documents. Manfred Mugrauer (b. 1977), employee of the Alfred Klahr Society who maintains and manages the KPÖ files, states that there were no plans within the party to hand over files for archiving, like, for example, the files of the individual departments of the Central Committee. As a result, there are very few records of individual departments and commissions, which is also true for most of the district, regional, and subsidiary organisations of the KPÖ (Mugrauer 2013: 226).

In analysing the content of the papers, only those that were directly attributable to KPÖ members and followers were included in the hermeneutic document analysis. Guest contributions based on lectures, such as by foreign academics, were repeatedly printed—especially in the KPÖ journal *Weg und Ziel* (Way and Goal). There are also translations of articles from foreign communist newspapers. Since the views in such guest contributions do not reflect KPÖ's ideological position, the reprints and translations were only used to provide readers with information;⁹ the analysis of the content of the KPÖ's position towards religion and atheism did not include such "external contributions."

⁸ Because in Austria—in contrast to the Soviet Union and the GDR, for example—there was free ideological competition between communist-atheistic and religious world interpretations, the religious market model according to Finke and Stark (2000 and 2003) can be used to explain the socio-political framework.

⁹ Normally, the contributions were printed without additional commentary, only with a footnote indicating that it was a previously given lecture. For example, in 1949, the final chapter of the book *Wissenschaft und Religion* (Science and Religion) by Marcel Cachin, member of the Politburo of the KPÖ, was printed in the party journal *Weg und Ziel*. However, it is not clear whether the KPÖ shared Cachin's views or if this was reprinted only as a tribute to Cachin in celebration of his eightieth birthday (see N.N. 1949).

2. Historical Development

2.1. The Time until 1945

The early phase of the KPÖ (founded on November 3, 1918) is downplayed as minimally successful. Dependent on financial help from the Hungarian communists—and therefore reliant on them—the party attempted a coup on April 17, 1919, which failed due to the intervention of the Austrian police, albeit not without casualties (Hauch 2018: 65). The party’s membership numbers increased massively in the first few months after its founding, but the following year marked a “decline in the revolutionary culture” in Austrian society, with the KPÖ only receiving 26,651 votes at the National Council elections on October 17, 1920, fewer than the number of its members at that time (Hauch 2018: 69). During the KPÖ’s “bolshevization” in the mid-1920s, the already weak party shrank “into a minimally influential, almost inactive [political] force” (Mugrauer 2013: 216). In the interwar period the social democracy was very successful, making unnecessary the political need for a second left-wing party in Austria during this time.

2.2. The Time After the Second World War

The occupation of Austria by Allied troops in the spring of 1945 led to the re-establishment of the country as a nation independent of Germany. Concurrently, Joseph Stalin’s (1878–1953) plan to create a neutral buffer zone in central Europe between the Western Allies and the Soviet sphere of influence failed. Stalin expected that the Americans would withdraw from Europe after the end of the war and he could then agree with the British on their respective spheres of interest—similar to his pact with Hitler in August 1939. However, with the Americans remaining in Germany and Austria, and Yugoslavia’s departure from the Soviet Bloc in the second half of the 1940s, there was no plan on the part of the USSR as to what kind of role Austria should play in Europe in the future, whether the occupation by Allied troops should be maintained, or Austria might even be divided like Germany.¹⁰ Until 1953, representatives of the Allies repeatedly conducted diplomatic negotiations to clarify the future of Austria, but these talks did not bring about any significant progress. Hence, until the death of the Soviet dictator in March 1953, there

¹⁰ For details on the Soviet policy towards Austria after 1945, see Mueller et al. 2005.

were constant fears that Austria would be divided into two separate countries, similar to the situation in Germany from 1949 onwards. Only with Stalin's death and the end of the Korean War in the same year did new negotiation positions arise. With the founding of NATO and the Warsaw Pact in 1955, the new leader of the USSR, Nikita Chruščëv (1894–1971), had to resolve the Austrian question in order to consolidate the Soviet geostrategic sphere of power in Eastern Central and Southeast Europe. The negotiations between the Soviet Union and the Western Allies over a complete withdrawal of troops from Austria and the declaration of the country's neutrality only lasted a few months, leading the elected parliamentarians of the Austrian National Council to declare the neutrality of their country on October 26, 1955. This fulfilled the conditions for the withdrawal of the Allied troops and marked the end of a direct Soviet influence in Austria.

2.3. The KPÖ with Governmental Responsibility for the Second Republic

At the end of the Second World War, the KPÖ, whose leadership returned from exile in Moscow in 1945,¹¹ saw itself as bearing responsibility for the new government. However, there was no strong social support for the participation of the communists in Austria's first post-war government. The Soviet military administration did not exert any direct pressure on personnel decisions in favour of KPÖ representatives, but where adequate consideration of the communists was uncertain, Soviet measures led to securing them. The Soviet authorities worked together with the KPÖ, whose role as a trusted organisation was signalled to the other parties by the involvement of KPÖ representatives in decisive meetings. There was no Soviet pressure for a communist majority, but there is no doubt that the parity model enforced by the occupation force indirectly favoured the traditionally weak KPÖ (Mueller 2006: 151).

With the active help of the Soviet occupation forces, selected and trained (exiled) communists were able to obtain a number of important administrative and security positions in the first weeks of the post-war era. The KPÖ was rebuilt by this "Moscow clique" around Stalinist ideas in the span of a

11 The Soviet leadership was keen to bring "proven" cadres of the Austrian exiled KP to Austria along with the invasion of the Red Army in order to quickly ensure the reconstruction of the KPÖ and install its representatives in strategically important administrative offices. See the letter from Dimitrov to Stalin on sending a group of Austrian communists and anti-fascists to III. Ukrainian front of April 3, 1945 (Mueller et al. 2005: 108-111).

few weeks, which led to the selected cadres—in consultation with the Soviet occupation troops—becoming solely responsible for decision-making within the party, something that was also reflected in a considerable number of privileges (Keller 1994: 109).

Due to the more careful tactics by the Soviet occupying power in Austria than in the countries under the sole occupation of the Red Army, the other two major parties—the conservative Austrian People's Party (*Österreichische Volkspartei*; ÖVP) and the Social Democratic Party of Austria (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*; SPÖ)—succeeded in isolating the KPÖ within the government in the months that followed. In a meeting of KPÖ representatives with representatives of the military council of the Soviet military leadership in Austria on May 16, 1945, the secretary of the Central Committee of the KPÖ, Johann Koplenig (1891–1968), blamed the Roman Catholic Church—in addition to the Social Democrats—for the isolation of the KPÖ within the provisional government. Koplenig alleged that the Catholics and Social Democrats were trying to forge an alliance against the Communists, with the Social Democrats focusing on influencing the industrial and urban sectors and the Catholic Church on the peasantry, businesses, civil servants, and the crafts industry. The aim was supposedly to besmirch the Communists in these social milieus and divide the political and administrative positions between the Catholic Church and the Social Democrats.¹²

KPÖ member and interior minister of the provisional government Franz Honner (1893–1964) made similar comments during the meeting, also speaking of an alleged coalition between the SPÖ and the Catholic Church with the aim of eliminating the Communists. Honner even went so far as to compare the supposed actions of the SPÖ and representatives of the Catholic Church with the National Socialist “alignment” (*Gleichschaltung*) policies of the public administration (Mueller et al. 2005: 149).

Hence, just one month after the provisional government was formed with the participation by the KPÖ, the KPÖ representatives recognised that they had no significant public support. The promotion of the KPÖ by the Soviet representatives, the occupation of the crucial positions in the party by exiled Muscovites, and the party's uncritical obedience to Stalin turned the KPÖ into a “Russian party” in the eyes of almost all Austrians in just a few months, a “red-white-red” agent of the Soviet occupying power (Keller 1994: 111).

With the disastrous voting result of only 5.42 per cent in the first post-war elections in November 1945, the KPÖ had already lost political influence in

¹² See the minutes from the meeting of representatives of the Military Council of the III. Ukrainian front with senior staff of the KPÖ and members of the Provisional Government on May 16, 1945 (Mueller et al. 2005: 147).

Austria at that time (Mueller 2006: 154). Initially, it remained in the government as a junior partner. Interestingly, the party leadership's justifications to the Moscow authorities regarding the party's unexpectedly poor performance did not result in directly accusing the Roman Catholic Church. The reasons included all common prejudices, such as the behaviour of former Nazis, a shift to the right by the Social Democrats, a lack of knowledge among the population about crimes committed by Austrian National Socialists, anti-communist resentments, and "parasites" within the party—but the influences of Christian churches were not cited as a possible reason for the party's disastrous performance.¹³ Given the various forms of support to or at least benevolent tolerance of fascist dictatorships by Catholic circles in Europe until 1945 (and much longer in South America and Spain) (Blaschke 2014: 15-40), such an accusation could not have been dismissed out of hand and was indeed not put forth by the KPÖ.

In this phase, the party experienced another "Stalinisation," resulting in a glorification of party leader Koplenig, a campaign promoted by the party press against "enemies within our own ranks," and a related purging of the party (*Parteisäuberung*) (Keller 1994: 115-118). It must be emphasised, however, that this was an internal process on the part of the KPÖ leadership. As research conducted over the past few decades has shown, the individual Communist parties and leaderships within the Soviet-controlled sphere of power had a variety of options for securing space to manoeuvre with regard to party and state politics. The respective conditions and the interests of the individual protagonists were decisive in to what extent the individual party leaders submitted to the requirements from Moscow or went against the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). With regard to the KPÖ, this means that the process of Stalinisation in the late 1940s and the attitudes towards the uprisings in Hungary (1956) and Prague (1968) were not necessarily based on Muscovite guidelines; there were also alternative options for action (see Mueller 2007).

With the signing of the State Treaty of Vienna in 1955 and the withdrawal of the Soviet troops—both seemingly surprising for the KPÖ, since they were not consulted by Soviet representatives (Mueller et al. 2005: 55)—the KPÖ saw itself politically very much weakened, robbed of its local ally, and could no longer rely on the direct support of the Soviet representatives in the country.

Despite the de-Stalinisation (*Entstalinisierung*) of the CPSU at the twentieth party congress in 1956 and the withdrawal of the occupying troops in 1955, the KPÖ leadership cadres remained in their previous line of leading

¹³ See documents no. 24 and 25 in Mueller et al. 2005: 222-243.

the party as a pure cadre one, and did not reflect on the possible mistakes from the previous years. The Stalin cult that had formed in the party leadership was only discussed in the following years and only after the party base demanded it. Following the CPSU's twentieth party congress, the uprising in Hungary at the end of 1956, and the subsequent military intervention by the Soviet Union, the KPÖ critically questioned its own policies to date. The unconditional adherence to the Soviet Union had made it easy for political opponents in Austria to regard the KPÖ as a "Russian party," as an extended arm of the Soviet Union in Austria (see Mugrauer 2007).

The attempt by the KPÖ party leadership (who were politicised in exile in Moscow in the 1930s) to initially prevent all discussions about both Chruščëv's secret speech at the CPSU's twentieth party congress and the subsequent assessment of the events in Hungary as an "anti-communist coup" disillusioned many members of the party base.¹⁴ Due to the failing of the party leadership to come up with any noteworthy work-up in the following months, no personnel changes were made and the unexpected withdrawal of the Soviet troops came as a complete surprise to many Austrian communists, resulting in about a third of the members leaving the party (Keller 1994: 120).¹⁵ In addition to the quantitative loss, the resignations or party exclusions of intellectuals and experienced politicians also caused a qualitative loss of members within the KPÖ. Nevertheless, the dogmatists had prevailed at the end of 1956, which ultimately prevented the party from realigning itself programmatically and ideologically (Baier 2009: 120-121).¹⁶

The subsequent developments in Prague in 1968 presented the KPÖ leadership with serious ideological problems: on the one hand was the strong belief in the infallibility of the CPSU leadership; on the other hand was their own declaration of August 21, 1968, which urged members to respect the sovereignty of the ČSSR and not to resolve the tense situation by military means. Shortly before the September issue of *Weg und Ziel* went to press, when the Warsaw Pact troops began their invasion of the ČSSR, the newspaper's editors were forced to position themselves clearly. They explicitly distanced themselves from the invasion and even described the official founding of the Soviet Union as a pretext to "act in truth against the democratic renewal of socialism in Czechoslovakia [...] to which we have had such great hopes" (N.N. 1968: 401).

14 In 1989, the official party history drawn up by the KPÖ's Historical Commission spoke of a "counter-revolutionary uprising" that had taken place in Hungary at the end of 1956 (Historische Kommission 1989: 430).

15 For criticism of these numbers, see Mugrauer 2007: 282-283.

16 Walter Baier (b. 1954), a member of the KPÖ since 1972, was the party leader between 1994 and 2006.

With their clear position the editorial team was openly opposed to the previously dominant Soviet affiliation of the KPÖ, but the emancipation process would not take long. The Stalin cult was also openly criticised during this short phase, when Franz Marek (1913–1979), for example, a fervent advocate of the subordination to the Stalinist Soviet Union in the late 1940s, now accused of religious elevation both Stalin and the Stalin cult. However, this phenomenon was not the Communists' fault, but the result of framework conditions such as the Great Depression, the Second World War, the Cold War, etc. The concentration on the Soviet Union meant that every decision was supported, but it had not provided an alternative to such a dominant Soviet focus (Marek 1968).¹⁷ Such a relativisation of one of the most important party ideologists like Marek, who publicly paid homage to Stalin until the 1950s and, in the eyes of party members, “faithfully” followed the Soviet dictator unconditionally, discredited the party leadership among some of the members (see, e.g., Hofmann 1969).

Manfred Mugrauer points out that the serious intra-party disputes in the wake of the violent suppression of the Prague Spring not only took place as a factional struggle

between Orthodox-Stalinist “dogmatists” and progressive reform-oriented “revisionist.” The vast majority of party members followed a line between these two extreme positions, but were marginalised (Mugrauer 2013: 223).

The “dogmatists” ultimately prevailed, many of the “revisionists” left the party, and as of 1970 the KPÖ could again be described as a Stalinist party, in which until 1990 virtually no democracy and no diversity of opinion were tolerated (Mugrauer 2009).

3. Debates on Religion and Atheism at the Party Congresses from 1946 to 1990

What is striking in the reports and contributions to discussions during the KPÖ party congresses is the purposeful silence surrounding Christian churches and religion. With the party's political downfall starting in the mid-1950s, party officials and congress delegates were concerned with ways to

¹⁷ The fact that Marek continued to follow the ideological guidelines of the Soviet Communist Party without criticism is also evident in his attitude towards the Chinese Communist Party, whose ideology he rejected because it did not follow the Marxist-Leninist reading of the Soviet style (see Marek 1967). On Marek's own worship of Stalin until the twentieth CPSU party conference in 1956, see, e.g., Marek 1949.

improve the party's public perception. Although current developments such as the emergence of the environmental and anti-nuclear movement, the women's movement, as well as local and regional citizens' initiatives had been noticed since the 1970s, there were no plans for structural co-operation with these groups, because the latter were dealt with great reservation.¹⁸ Only in the course of the anti-fascist protests in 1965, triggered by the killing of the communist Ernst Kirchweyer (1898–1965) by Austrian neo-Nazis, did the party and the Catholics organise events together (Mugrauer 2015).

The various proposals to improve the situation of the party, such as, among others, increased election activities in villages, agitation in works councils, attraction of young people as new party members, or the use of artists at party events never included the possibility of working with Catholic Church groups in order to win new voters for the KPÖ. The KPÖ's sixteenth party congress in 1954 can be used as an example. In order to overcome the party's structural weaknesses, party leader Johann Koplénig even proposed recruiting new members in sports clubs. No mention was made of the Christian churches or the possibility of advertising for new party members among the Catholic working class (Koplénig 1954). Likewise, the Christian churches showed no acknowledgement of the KPÖ. In 1953, the Catholic Archdiocese of Vienna set up a unit to address worldview questions, whose main task was the collection and evaluation of materials from non-Catholic religious and worldview communities. A collection dedicated to atheistic ideas or to the KPÖ cannot be found in the department's archives.¹⁹

The few references to the Catholic Church and religion in the official announcements of the party congresses in most cases refer to general prejudices against unnamed church representatives, which would be in line with the party doctrine of the ÖVP. Irma Schwager (1920–2015), chairwoman of the KPÖ-affiliated Federation of Democratic Women (*Bund Demokratischer Frauen*) and member of the KPÖ's central committee, in reference to the lack of equality for women in Austria, maintained that it should be the party's mandate to

¹⁸ See the contributions to the discussion at the twenty-fourth Congress of the Austrian Communist Party (N.N. 1980).

¹⁹ I would like to thank Johannes Sinabell from the Department for Worldview Questions (*Bereich für Weltanschauungsfragen*) of the Catholic Archdiocese of Vienna for supporting my research. Due to the Department's relocation, part of the historical archive of the section for *Weltanschauungsfragen* is currently not accessible. This means that the statement that the Catholic Church did not observe the KPÖ is to be understood with reservations.

act against the convoluted conservative views of the ÖVP, the FPÖ²⁰ and the clerical circles. Sometimes they have a modern vocabulary and act as though they are only interested in the interests of women and the family, but in reality their suggestions perpetuate the disadvantaged and subordinate position of women [...] (Schwager 1980: 192).²¹

Such generalisations by party officials always refer to undefined, abstract “circles.” This becomes equally clear in the statements by Franz Honner, the former Interior Minister and member of the KPÖ Central Committee. During a lecture in front of the KPÖ regional leadership of Burgenland on January 8, 1955, Honner not only suspected the representatives of the Catholic Church in Austria, but also the “Vatican by order of the US” to work towards Austria’s integration into the Federal Republic of Germany.²²

One of the KPÖ’s main problems in the first two decades after the Second World War was its ideological vagueness, since the party seemed to rely too much on the support of the Soviet occupation troops. S. I. Kovalëv, the representative of the High Commissioner of the USSR for Upper Austria, criticised the leadership of the KPÖ regional group of Upper Austria for lacking a party programme with clear formulations for the achievement of the ultimate goal. The KPÖ advocated a “unified, independent, and democratic Austria,” but did not specify at any point what this could mean.²³ The lack of engagement with the topics of Christianity and religion as a whole is likely to be found in the party’s programmatic vagueness. Especially in the early years, when the KPÖ still had little political influence, there was no concrete idea of how to position itself towards religion or representatives of institutional religions.

This contrasts with isolated and very sporadic statements from the party base at the party congresses, which demanded the party to approach church circles. At the KPÖ’s twenty-fourth party congress in December 1980, Otto

20 The Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*) is an Austrian far right-wing party.

21 “[...] gegen die verzopften konservativen Auffassungen aufzutreten, die von der ÖVP, der FPÖ und den klerikalen Kreisen verbreitet werden. Sie haben zwar manchmal ein modernes Vokabular und tun, als ob sie nur das Interesse der Frau und der Familie im Auge hätten, aber in Wirklichkeit verewigen ihre Vorschläge die benachteiligte und unmündige Stellung der Frau, [...]”

22 From the short minutes of the plenary meeting of the Burgenland KPÖ regional management on January 8, 1955, with a lecture by F. Honner (cited in Mueller et al. 2005: 971-973).

23 Minutes from the conversation between representative of the High Commissioner of the USSR for Upper Austria S. I. Kovalëv and the leadership of the KPÖ of Upper Austria on February 25, 1955 (cited in Mueller et. al. 2005: 1011-1017, quote on p. 1011).

Kreilisheim (1909–1999) from the Austrian Peace Council (*Österreichischer Friedensrat*) asked to address groups within the Christian churches that were actively opposed to the nuclear armament of the Eastern and Western blocs:

Should it not be possible to establish contacts at the local level? That will certainly not be easy for us [the KPÖ], since barriers have to be overcome here. As a consolation it should be noted that it is also not easy for the other side to sit down with us. But it is necessary, it is an imperative of the hour (Kreilisheim 1980: 247).²⁴

The reservations towards co-operation with representatives of religious groups become clear in this statement, but the end justified the means. Therefore, while the Christian churches served as an abstract image of an opponent with regard to the enforcement of women's rights, which together with the ÖVP and FPÖ would prevent any improvement in the situation of women in Austria, co-operation with church representatives on anti-nuclear campaigns was certainly possible. However, it was not so much the respective issues that gave rise to such a different attitude towards co-operation with the Christian churches. The reason is rather to be found in the different perceptions between the party leadership and the party base. While Irma Schwager (a member of the Central Committee), in line with the Marxist (party) ideology and Soviet anti-church propaganda of the 1950s, understood the Christian churches as natural allies of the bourgeoisie, Otto Kreilisheim (a representative of the party base) understood the Catholic church and other social actors as potential partners for realising individual goals for Austrian society.

The same can be said about the speech by Elisabeth Holzinger from the KPÖ-affiliated Association of Democratic Teachers and Educators (*Bund demokratischer Lehrer und Erzieher*). As a representative of the party base, Holzinger also pleaded for co-operation with Church groups such as the Young Catholic Worker Movement (*Katholische Arbeiterjugend*), which raised the same demands as the KPÖ for the reform of the Austrian education system (Kreilisheim 1980: 246–247). For representatives of the party leadership, on the one hand, the ideological attitude was the focus of the assessment for possible co-operation. For representatives of the party base, on the other hand, things were different: it was not the basic ideological attitude that should determine possible (sometimes temporary) co-operation; rather, it was

²⁴ "Sollte es nicht möglich sein, Kontakte dieser Art auf lokaler Ebene herzustellen? Das wird uns [der KPÖ] sicher nicht leichtfallen, da hier Barrieren zu überwinden sind. Als Trost sei vermerkt, daß es auch für die andere Seite nicht leicht ist, sich mit uns an einen Tisch zu setzen. Aber es ist notwendig, es ist ein Gebot der Stunde."

the concurring demands such as the reform of the education system or gender equality.

The large discrepancy between party leadership and parts of the party base over the entire investigation period becomes clear at the KPÖ's eighteenth party conference. In his report of the Central Committee, party leader Koplenig presented all the ideological reservations against the Catholic Church:

Political clericalism is a serious and ever-increasing threat to progressive development in Austria, which already occupies a dominant position in cultural life and makes great efforts to increase its influence on school, family life and youth. By filling important positions of trust in the state apparatus with reliable members of the clerical CV,²⁵ through its positions in the [Austrian] army, through its interference in the politics of the country and the ruling parties, clericalism is a driving factor in strengthening the reactionary forces. Political clericalism foments the Cold War and is one of the banners of hatred and propaganda against the countries of socialism. Although the clericals speak of democracy, their real goal is to establish a totalitarian, anti-popular corporate state [*volksfeindlicher Ständestaat*], in which big business rules without restrictions. The Vatican and the heads of clericalism in Austria are also committed to the return of the Habsburgs.

In contrast to the leadership of the SP [SPÖ] through its adherence to the Church, making it easier for clericalism to penetrate into the ranks of the working class, our party wages a constant struggle against the danger of clerical reaction, which finds support of broad sections, including socialist workers.

It was our party and our press that exposed the already well-developed machinations of the Habsburgs, the clericals and the government parties, and our emphatic intervention also forced the SP to take a stand against the Habsburgs' return (Koplenig 1961: 120).²⁶

²⁵ The *Cartellverband* was a very influential organisation in business and politics in Austria at that time.

²⁶ "Eine ernste und ständig wachsende Gefahr für die fortschrittliche Entwicklung in Osterreich ist der politische Klerikalismus, der schon jetzt eine vorherrschende Stellung im kulturellen Leben einnimmt und große Anstrengungen macht, um seinen Einfluss auf die Schule, auf das Familienleben und auf die Jugend zu verstärken. Durch die Besetzung wichtiger Vertrauensposten im Staatsapparat mit verlässlichen Mitgliedern des klerikalen CV, durch seine Positionen im Bundesheer, durch seine Einmischung in die Politik des Landes und der Regierungsparteien ist der Klerikalismus ein treibender Faktor bei der Stärkung der reaktionären Kräfte. Der politische Klerikalismus schürt den Kalten Krieg und ist einer der Bannerträger der Haß- und Hetzpropaganda gegen die Länder des Sozialismus. Obwohl die Klerikalen von der Demokratie sprechen, ist ihr wahres Ziel die Errichtung

According to Kopenig, the education system must therefore be completely freed from the influence of “clericalism” (Kopenig 1961: 127), a view that various party officials adopted in the subsequent debate.

It is not surprising that the party base did not express any opposing opinions at the party congress. The party congresses up to 1965 followed a strict, predetermined protocol, which did not allow free discussion. It was only with the change of party leadership at the nineteenth party congress in favour of Franz Muhri (1924–2001) that a short period of intra-party democratisation followed, which in turn can be seen in the relationship between Communism, atheism, and religion.

In his first speech as the new party leader, Muhri made it clear that with the new Pope John XXIII (1881–1963; p. 1958–1963) there were currents within the Roman Catholic Church whose protagonists were interested in a dialogue with the communists. He also pleaded for a new way of dealing with the ÖVP, since, in his opinion, not all members of this party were part of reactionary forces (Muhri 1965: 78–79). A new member of the Central Committee, Franz Hager (1920–2010), summed it up in the following debate over Muhri’s speech by demanding an ideological analysis of religious ideas about the use of the socialist cause, since the KPÖ had not yet identified such a relationship (Hager 1965: 294–295). Walter Hollitscher (1911–1986), previously active in the GDR as a professor of philosophy, who was also elected to the Central Committee of the KPÖ in 1965, expressed the same opinion. He advocated a dialogue between Marxists and Christians, because the conditions had changed and such a dialogue was now necessary (Hollitscher 1965: 237–240).

This new tone within the party leadership to clarify its own relationship to religion—especially to the Roman Catholic Church—would actually be addressed over the next five years. In 1965, the party leadership installed its own Working Group on Problems of Catholicism (*Arbeitskreis für Probleme*

eines totalitären, volksfeindlichen Ständestaates, in dem das Großkapital schrankenlos herrscht. Der Vatikan und die Spitzen des Klerikalismus in Österreich sind es auch, die sich für die Rückkehr Habsburgs einsetzen.

Im Gegensatz zur Führung der SP [SPÖ], die durch ihre Anbiederung an die Kirche dem Klerikalismus das Eindringen in die Reihen der Arbeiterklasse erleichtert, führt unsere Partei einen ständigen Kampf gegen die Gefahr der klerikalen Reaktion, wobei sie die Unterstützung breiter Schichten, auch sozialistischer Arbeiter, findet.

Unsere Partei und unsere Presse waren es, die die schon weit gediehenen Machinationen der Habsburger, der Klerikalen und der Regierungsparteien aufdeckten und unser unterschiedenes Auftreten hat auch die SP gezwungen, gegen die Rückkehr Habsburg Stellung zu nehmen.”

des Katholizismus beim Zentralkomitee der Kommunistischen Partei Österreichs), which was directly attached to the Central Committee. Until the party's "Prague crisis" in 1969, the working group developed concepts for a dialogue with Catholicism, about which the party base could also obtain information through pamphlets. However, such activities ceased with the renewed Stalinisation of the KPÖ beginning in 1969/1970 and the working group stopped its activities. This was also due to leading members of the working group resigning from the party.

In spite of this short phase of opening to new interpretations and criticism of the party's course over the past decades, the KPÖ's engagement with religion on an ideological level was still of no importance. The party base saw this differently, taking the party congresses as an opportunity for such considerations. At the twentieth party congress in 1969, the district organisation of Gänserndorf (Lower Austria) submitted a request for the central committee to address the Marxist view on religion and religious policy in a separate meeting. The fact that the party base submitted such a request to a congress of a centralised party indicates that some of the members demanded clarification on topics dealing with their own party leadership:

Austria is still one of the countries with a predominantly traditional, Christian population. Well-known groups of working people, workers, white-collar workers, farmers, small businessmen, many scientists and members of the liberal intelligentsia and the student body, democratic, anti-fascist, national-Austrian circles within the political parties are still Christian believers. On the other hand, because of their class base and position in the trade union, they are objectively dependent on an alternative policy similar to ours. We rightly assume that without or against the Austrian Marxists and Communists there can be no sustainable struggle for democracy, for social and national security, for socialism, but we say today with the same justification and obligation that in a traditional Christian country like Austria, a revolutionary transformation of existing social conditions will never be possible without the active participation of the believing circles described above. [...] Such joint action becomes possible (and indeed is already) to the extent that the religious consciousness of these circles ceases to be an obstacle in light of the regularities of our time. This kind of rethinking within progressive believing groups is already underway. It is therefore all the more urgent that the new Central Committee deal in detail with ideological and political questions in this regard (Bezirksorganisation Gänserndorf 1969: 61).²⁷

27 "Österreich zählt auch heute noch zu den Ländern mit überwiegend traditionell christlicher Bevölkerung. Namhafte Teile arbeitender Menschen, Arbeiter, Angestellte,

The application review committee of the party congress recommended that the application be accepted and forwarded to the central committee. However, it seems that the whole matter was not addressed due to the profound discrepancies surrounding the twentieth party convention. At the twenty-first party congress of the KPÖ in 1970, the Gänserndorf district organisation re-submitted the application (Bezirksorganisation Gänserndorf 1970: 335). Although it was officially submitted to the party congress, there is no archival evidence that it was discussed or accepted. As already mentioned, there were massive intra-party problems in 1969/1970, but the fact that the party leadership ignored an application from the party base twice shows that the issue of religion was given no attention because it had no relevance to the party's ideology.

Such omission of the issue of religion would continue at subsequent party congresses. In 1974, no statements at all about dealing with Christian churches and religion can be found, whereas at the twenty-third party congress in 1977 there was only one message. In the discussion about the report from the party leadership, the editor of the party's newspaper *Volksstimme* (People's Voice) Andreas Rasp (1946–1999) said that the KPÖ needed to approach the Catholic workers' organisations. The workers would move further and further away from the official church and thus the task would then be to win them over for the KPÖ. In this context, Rasp demanded not to engage in discussions about God, the afterlife, or other religious matters with these workers and, therefore, not to promote atheistic positions and debate basic ideological issues. Rather, the Catholic workers should decide to join the KPÖ based on everyday goals such as peace and similar ideas (Rasp 1977:

Bauern, Kleingewerbetreibende, viele Wissenschaftler und Angehörige der freischaffenden Intelligenz und der Studentenschaft, demokratische, antifaschistische, nationalösterreichische Kreise innerhalb der politischen Parteien sind nach wie vor gläubige Christen. Andererseits sind sie auf Grund ihrer Klassenbasis und Stellung in der Gewerkschaft objektiv auf eine Alternativpolitik, ähnlich unserer, angewiesen. Wir gehen mit Recht davon aus, daß ohne oder gegen die österreichischen Marxisten und Kommunisten es keinen nachhaltigen Kampf für Demokratie, für soziale und nationale Sicherheit, für Sozialismus geben kann, aber wir sagen mit derselbe Berechtigung und Verpflichtung heute, daß in einem traditionell christlichen Land wie Österreich eine revolutionäre Umgestaltung der bestehenden gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse auch niemals ohne die aktive Mitarbeit der oben geschilderten gläubigen Kreise möglich sein wird.

[...] Ein solches gemeinsames Handeln wird in dem Ausmaß möglich (und auch bereits wirklich), als das religiöse Bewußtsein dieser Kreise unter dem Eindruck der Gesetzmäßigkeiten unserer Epoche aufhört, ein Hindernis zu sein. Gerade ein solches Umdenken innerhalb fortschrittlicher gläubiger Gruppen ist bereits im Gange.

Umso dringender ist es, daß sich das neue Zentralkomitee mit diesbezüglichen ideologischen und politischen Fragen eingehend beschäftigt."

125-127). Rasp's aim was apparently to attract new members and draw workers who were expected to break away from the Roman Catholic Church and would need a new "home." Moreover, ideology or ideological interpretations were to be put aside given that the KPÖ held no clearly defined concept in dealing with religious issues. Rather, the party still followed the Soviet-influenced religious criticism of the 1950s, which, informed by a Marxist-functional perspective, understood religion predominantly as a supporter of the "capitalist reaction" (see Tesar 2019: 98-120).

The last point is clearly reflected in statements made at the twenty-fifth party congress in 1984. On the occasion of Pope John Paul II's (1920–2005; p. 1978–2005) visit to Austria in September 1983, party leader Franz Muhri stated that this visit had "stimulated reactionary-conservative tendencies in our country's Catholic Church" (Muhri 1984: 44). In Muhri's remarks at the 1984 party congress, the divergent perceptions of religion in terms of function on the one hand and the confrontation with reality on the other become visible, as was the case with Andreas Rasp seven years before. According to Rasp and Muhri, Christian churches had the supposed function of strengthening reactionary forces to prevent "socialist progress," a position which at the same time included a general criticism of religion. In addition, Muhri also had to state that in recent years there had been a national and international dialogue between "progressive" Catholics and Communists about "changing the situation in the world" and a "common struggle for peace" (Muhri 1984: 44). The leadership of the KPÖ had to admit that their own image of religion and the Christian churches – which was primarily a product of the adoption of Soviet criticism of religion from the Chruščev era – was no longer fully compatible with reality, especially with the advent of "liberation theology" and the anti-nuclear movement.

This contradictory interpretation became clear again at the following party congress. Muhri, still the party leader, expressly welcomed the decision of the Catholic Youth of Austria to call for an increase of development aid for socialist Nicaragua expecting greater co-operation between the Austrian government and the Central American country (Muhri 1987: 24). The KPÖ leadership had to recognise that parts of the Catholic Church were committed to the same political goals as the KPÖ. In contrast, in his party speech Muhri once again described the Catholic Church in the traditional critical Soviet-language propaganda style of the 1950s. The current hierarchy of the Austrian Catholic Church reflected a new political bias of the Austrians towards right-wing policy (ibid.: 27) and the "reactionary bishops of the Catholic Church" would support efforts against the peace movement, which is why the number of participants in the peace movement campaigns declined sharply (ibid.: 33).

With the emerging collapse of the Eastern Bloc in late 1989/early 1990, the interpretation of the Catholic Church in the official party congress contributions of the KPÖ ultimately changed. At the twenty-seventh party conference in mid-January 1990, the new party leader Walter Silbermayr (b. 1951) spoke in favour of a dialogue with the Austrian Catholic Church for the first time because the Church showed “positive” tendencies—a change which could be seen as a result of the party’s profound ideological crisis due to the demise of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe. Silbermayr, however, still made the qualification that the positive tendencies referred only to the Austrian Church, but not to Rome (Silbermayr 1990: 39). Nevertheless, for the first time, KPÖ leadership profoundly changed its attitude towards the Roman Catholic Church. Clearly this was due to its own identity-crisis caused by the loss of ideological leadership as an outcome of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

From the published party congress minutes, it can be observed that until 1990 the KPÖ did not develop an ideological concept that dealt with the subjects of religion, atheism, communism, and their relationship. Representatives of the party leadership expressed their views on the Christian churches, especially the Catholic Church in Austria, following the stereotypical positions of the religion-critical Soviet propaganda of the 1950s.²⁸ There was no unique ideological conception regarding whether or what function religion should assume in KPÖ politics. Even if this was occasionally demanded by representatives of the party base at party conferences and during the short period of democratisation in the KPÖ in the second half of the 1960s, it has to be stated that religion and atheism were irrelevant to the KPÖ party ideology.

4. The Party Journal *Weg und Ziel*

The results of the above discussion regarding the party leadership’s attitude vis-à-vis religion and atheism, drawn up with the help of the party congress minutes, are also corroborated by the party’s own journal *Weg und Ziel*. The journal was intended to strengthen the party at the ideological level and discuss problems at a theoretical level. Accessible to all party members by subscription, it addressed more ideological problems and basic questions than

²⁸ From the mid-1960s onwards, propaganda criticising religion in the Soviet Union was to be replaced in favour of scientific atheism, since the Soviet leadership had recognised that a stereotypically negative portrayal of religion did not diminish the latter’s influence on the population (Tesaf 2019: 121-170).

real, everyday issues, thus appealing more to an intellectual audience interested in communist ideology. At the twenty-first party congress in 1970, after the Working Group for Problems of Catholicism had to cease its work, party leader Muhri emphasised that the journal now had to play an important role in all areas of ideological-theoretical topics (Muhri 1970: 55). Putting such emphasis on the relevance of the party's journal by its leader at a party congress shows that the ideological bias of the journal was previously not coherent, and therefore needed further clarification. This clarification by the party leadership largely ended the journal's already poor engagement with the topic of religion-atheism-communism. Up until the mid-1960s—the short period up to 1969 still needs to be addressed—the official party announcements in *Weg und Ziel* on religion and the Christian churches followed the common stereotypes of Marxist critique: the social function of religion consisted in promising ordinary people a heavenly life after death in order to legitimise their supposed enslavement in this world.²⁹ The second stereotype portrayed the Christian churches as protector of the “reaction”; for example, the Vatican openly supported “reactionary” parties in France and Italy, which had previously legitimised fascism and were financially supported by capitalist donors (N.N. 1946: 365).

Jakob Rosner (1890–1970), editor of the *Volksstimme* and secretary of party leader Kopenig, similarly referred to the popes' advocacy for the protection of private property in several encyclicals (Rosner 1961). By advocating the protection of private property, according to Rosner, the Vatican made itself a henchman for capital and thus fundamentally disregarded its own Christian social teaching. With the collapse of feudal society and the transition to capitalism, the Christian churches had joined powers with capitalism in order to be able to maintain their own position within modern society. However, Rosner's main message to the reader of *Weg und Ziel* was not to fight the Christian churches or religious faith altogether, nor to replace religious ideas with atheistic interpretations of the world. Rather, the believing workers should be shown that a wrong direction was taken by church leadership and they should thus realise that following the papal guidelines—that is, respect for private property—would only foster the workers' lack of freedom. Therefore, in the end, Rosner called for co-operation between “communists, socialists, non-party members and religious workers [...] for the good of the whole class and all working people” (Rosner 1961: 320). Rosner's article

²⁹ The Austrian writer Leo Katz (1892–1954) is a characteristic proponent of this view. In 1950, he portrayed the Christian church as the main source of ideas and co-initiator of the “transformation of the ancient into the feudal-medieval society” (Katz 1950: 472).

presented no stringent arguments for an atheistic worldview as a “replacement” for religion. His real concern was the overcoming of capitalism, viewing the Christian churches as an essential pillar of the “capitalist system.” Rosner’s consideration was not an ideological debate between religion (or religiosity) and atheism, but merely the amassing of religious workers to achieve the goals of the KPÖ.

Another stereotype reinforced in *Weg und Ziel* was the exaggeration of (socialist) science as the only “true” way of explaining the world, to which religion was contrasted as a negative barrier. The philosopher Walter Hollitscher can be seen as a typical representative of such an interpretation of the world common within the KPÖ. As a result of the first successful earth orbit of a human-made satellite (Sputnik 1) in October 1957, Hollitscher, a member of the KPÖ Central Committee between 1965 and 1977, expressed himself in a polemical manner against the reactions of church representatives from the United States and the writings of the Austrian priest Johann Maria Lenz (1902–1985). Using selectively compiled statements, he attempted to make science’s victory over religion clear to the reader using the example of the human conquest of space (Hollitscher 1958). Hollitscher openly attacked religious ideas and contrasted their statements with the “truth” that only modern science could produce.

5. The Working Group for Problems of Catholicism in the KPÖ Central Committee

As already described, the party leadership broke with its dogmatism for about five years in the mid-1960s and during this time also opened up to debates about dealing with religion—primarily the Catholic Church. The working group for problems of Catholicism initiated by the party leadership in the central committee of the KPÖ tried to work out a theoretical and practical position for the party in dealing with atheism and religion. In one of the first pamphlets, which were accessible to all party members by subscription, the actual goals of the working group were also formulated. This pamphlet, probably published at the end of 1965, was not aimed at its own party members, but at members of the Austrian Workers and Employees Association (*Österreichischer Arbeiter- und Angestelltenbund*), the workers’ organisation of the conservative ÖVP. It stated that the KPÖ wanted to “overcome the outdated anti-clericalism” because Christians were seen as companions to the building of a socialist Austria (Arbeitskreis 1965: 1). Likewise, the Communists had

recognised that religion was not going to automatically die out with the elimination of capitalism and thus demanded complete freedom of belief and conscience, which also had to include the right to non-belief. Of course, addressed to members of the ÖVP, the Christian churches in a socialist Austria would continue to be given the opportunity to hold pastoral care and religious instruction in public schools (ibid.: 1-2).

This unprecedented approach towards religious people in Austria demonstrates the party's process of opening between 1965 and 1969. Party leader Muhri also agreed to this at the twentieth party congress in 1969. In his speech, Muhri advocated joint action with Christian representatives, despite the ongoing disagreements (Hager 1969: 53). These statements by the party leader, however, are not to be found in the official party congress minutes of the KPÖ's twentieth party congress, which can be explained by the controversial course of this particular congress. As already noted, the dogmatists prevailed within the KPÖ in late 1969 (Mugrauer 2013: 223) in the disputes over the evaluation of the Prague Spring. As a result, a number of reformers left the party and the working group also ceased to exist. Due to the controversy surrounding the future direction of the party at the end of 1969, Muhri's statements in regard to co-operation with representatives of Christianity must have fallen victim to the new-old Stalinist course of the KPÖ, explaining why the statements were not printed in the official minutes.

Interestingly, an article by Egon Rigler (1915-?) can be found in the working group's last publication, which still contained reform-oriented approaches regarding the relationship between Communists and Christians.³⁰ Contrary to the acceptance of Soviet influence that was critical of religion in the 1950s, Rigler spoke out against the typical stereotype of religion-critical Soviet propaganda that saw religion as a product of regressive thinking. Communists should also perceive the different directions within Catholicism and no longer accept atheism as a prerequisite for any kind of progressive actions (Riegler 1969: 46).

This contradicts the statements made by Hollitscher, who clearly positioned himself several times in the working group in a religion-critical fashion, resembling the Soviet-influenced atheistic worldview. Hollitscher reported extensively on a colloquium of Marxist sociologists of religion in Prague held in December 1966 (Hollitscher 1967: 5-14), clearly opposing to any softening of atheistic ideas in all forms of possible dialogues with religious representatives (Hager 1969: 53-54). He also repeated the classic Marxist-

30 Along with Hollitscher, Rigler was a member of the editorial board of the journal for religious dialogue *Rivista internazionale di Dialogo* (International Journal of Dialogue), founded in 1968 (Wenin and Druart 1968: 365-366).

Leninist interpretation of the loss of religion's function in socialist society (Hollitscher 1969: 61-82).

Franz Hager, Secretary of the Working Group who was elected to the Central Committee in 1969 and, one year later, to the Politburo of the KPÖ, wrote that Communists needed to recognise that in a Catholic country like Austria a socialist transformation could never succeed and would never be possible without the support of people with religious awareness. Therefore, a real freedom of conscience without state religion and without any kind of state atheism, as well as the fight against "sectarian anti-clericalism" were necessary. However, he explained that religious consciousness was certainly a distorted picture of reality, and with the establishment of Communism religious Austrians would recognise that their God was no longer necessary (Hager 1968: 3-12).

Hence, the working group can be seen as a discussion forum in which different ideas about the relationship between Communism, religion, and atheism were dealt with. In addition to direct calls for a willingness to engage in dialogue with religious representatives, however, there were also stringent positions (Hager) that predicted the final overcoming of religion along with radical-atheistic representatives (such as Hollitscher). The disparate statements within the short period of the working group's existence make it clear that the KPÖ had no basic conception of the relationship between religion and atheism. Those discussions ceased with the dissolution of the working group at the end of 1969, and the subject of communism-religion-atheism disappeared from the party's internal discourses.

6. Conclusion

Through the party congress minutes as well as KPÖ publications, it can be demonstrated that profound theoretical debates over the ideological meaning of atheism for the party's worldview never took place. The question of "why" was deliberately excluded, since a foundation of empirical data should first be formed in order to provide a verifiable basis for forthcoming studies.

Based on the data presented in this article, it can be seen that a valid statement about the ideological meaning of religion and atheism within communist worldview(s) is not possible. Rather, the historical, national, socio-political, and cultural framework conditions should be examined in more detail, which can then be used to make a statement about the importance of atheistic concepts within communist organisations.

The example of the KPÖ shows that in the early years after the Second World War religion was understood in terms of Soviet-style anti-religion

propaganda. There were no unique considerations or interpretations, only an adaptation of existing ideas. The years from 1965 to 1969 were a major exception, when a discussion indeed took place about how to deal with religion as well as its representatives and followers. However, this short period can be explained by the reform-oriented opening of the party leadership and the party base's need to find a stance for orientation. The partially contradictory views within the working group show that the discourse had only just begun and did not end in 1969. As a result of the discourse-enforcing "dogmatists" within the party at the end of 1969, such debates came to a standstill and would only start again with the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the complete elimination of the Soviet Union as an ideological point of reference.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the example of the KPÖ made it clear that there were quite different perceptions in the relatively few debates about the Christian churches and religion. This means that religion, church, and believers were not understood as one entity, but they were rather viewed separately. Religion often acted as the "remnant of feudal and capitalist society" in Marx's functionalist interpretation, which is a theoretical concept of the world (Klötzing-Madest 2017: 46). The assessment of the Christian churches and its believers was based on practical convictions, which in most cases had a specific Austrian context. The Catholic Church was regarded as a "haven of reaction" due to its postulated proximity to the ÖVP, even if there were concessions for "progressive" thoughts within the churches. A completely different attitude was assumed towards religious people. Representatives of the party base, in particular, saw them as an indispensable co-operation partner for the development of a socialist Austria.

This internal differentiation and, in quantitative terms, the very few references to religion and atheism indicate that the lived reality of a communist organisation did not necessarily lead to an ideological discussion on religion. Accordingly, elements of some kind of "substitute religion" (*Ersatzreligion*) did not find their way into the party's ideological worldview. With regard to the KPÖ, it can be stated—at least at this point—that the general conditions after 1945, such as the party's rapid loss of political importance and internal developments within the party, meant that such discourses were not necessary.

List of Abbreviations

CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
ČSSR	<i>Československá socialistická republika</i> (Czechoslovak Socialist Republic)
FPÖ	<i>Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs</i> (Freedom Party of Austria)
GDR	German Democratic Republic
KPÖ	<i>Kommunistische Partei Österreichs</i> (Communist Party of Austria)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
ÖVP	<i>Österreichische Volkspartei</i> (Austrian People's Party)
SED	<i>Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands</i> (Socialist Unity Party of Germany)
SPÖ	<i>Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs</i> (Social Democratic Party of Austria)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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