

“Vom ‚rechten‘ Glauben und seinen Ansprüchen” by Sigrid Rettenbacher (published April 23, 2025, on [Feinschwarz.net](https://www.feinschwarz.net)); English version (translated by Sofia Nikitaki and Amy Casteel)

### *The “Right” Faith and Its Claims*

In recent months, there has been a rising number of attempts at intimidation and attacks against theologians at Austrian faculties – increasingly also in their private lives. These incidents must be viewed in connection with international right-wing Christian networks. The Austrian section of the **ESWTR** (European Society of Women in Theological Research) has approached the Austrian Bishops' Conference, requesting that they take a stance on the matter. **Sigrid Rettenbacher**, chair of ESWTR Austria, highlights the connections between these international anti-democratic Christian networks and Austria.

Recently, several publications have appeared concerning the topic of right-wing Christian networks.<sup>1</sup> These financially powerful networks operate on an international level—with connections as far as Russia and the USA—and they have become a determining factor in Europe as well, unnoticed by a broader public. They proceed strategically, deliberately placing individuals in important positions – in politics, academia, dioceses, and the media – in order to concretely implement their agendas.<sup>2</sup> In terms of content, these networks are united by an “ecumenism of hate,”<sup>3</sup> a shared rejection of human and civil rights in the name of “traditional Christian values” – including opposition to women’s rights, the rights of the LGBTQIA\* community, and religious freedom. One of their declared aims is to combat the alleged threat posed by Islam to the Christian West. Their explicit goal is the weakening of democratic core values and the search for alternative forms of societal order, including models inspired by Austrofascism.<sup>4</sup> These democracy-endangering networks are also mentioned in the current report on right-wing extremism commissioned by the Austrian Ministry of Justice and the Austrian Ministry of the Interior, prepared by the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance (DÖW).<sup>5</sup>

#### **“The starting point of the revival of integralism at the European level”**

If one delves deeper into the subject of these networks, one cannot avoid a name that leads directly into the Catholic Church and the academic landscape of Austria: Edmund Waldstein O. Cist., a monk and priest in Heiligenkreuz, who teaches at the Philosophical-Theological College Benedict XVI Heiligenkreuz and at the Catholic University ITI in Trumau. He is also working on his habilitation in moral theology at the Catholic-Theological Faculty in Innsbruck. In the American context, he is described as one of the Catholic influencers,<sup>6</sup> whose influence reaches as far as the Catholic U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance. Vance not only engages with Waldstein’s writings but also shows interest in Austrofascism – as does U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth.<sup>7</sup> Waldstein is a prominent advocate of Catholic (neo-)integralism, which challenges liberal democracies and seeks the subordination of temporal power to spiritual power.<sup>8</sup> In 2012, a conference took place in Trumau that marked the starting point of the revival of integralism at the European level, where Waldstein participated alongside other international integralist thinkers.<sup>9</sup>

**“This strategy has allowed integralism to function as a kind of Catholic veneer for authoritarians like Trump or Viktor Orbán, but it could just as easily be invoked to support even more brazen brutality.”**

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation explicitly warns about integralism, naming Waldstein specifically.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the American systematic theologian Timothy Troutner writes:

*Integralist intellectuals offer a strident critique of the dominant political ideology of the United States and Western Europe, which they call “liberalism.” In place of liberalism’s*

*supposedly neutral procedural arrangements, integralists hold that a just society should promote a particular, Catholic vision of the “common good.” They do not aim to pursue a Catholic agenda within pluralistic societies that defend religious freedom and other liberal rights, but to dictate the very terms in which the public square is understood. Their ultimate hope is to create “integral” Catholic regimes that “subordinate” temporal government to the spiritual authority of the Church.*

*The integralists’ sweeping rhetoric about the dangers of “liberalism,” however, can license almost any political project that promises to combat it. Such vagueness seems intentional. Relying on concepts like the “common good” helps conceal the specific commitments integralists actually have, and terms like “subordinate” leave vague the measures required to realize their ideal confessional state. This strategy has allowed integralism to function as a kind of Catholic veneer for authoritarians like Trump or Viktor Orbán, but it could just as easily be invoked to support even more brazen brutality. In the medieval regimes integralists admire, the “common good” or the “subordination of the temporal to the spiritual” sometimes entailed burning heretics at the stake and putting Jewish people into ghettos.<sup>11</sup>*

**“On his personal blog ‘Sanrucensis,’ Edmund Waldstein writes openly in favor of the death penalty for heretics.”**

That integralists do, in fact, support the punishment and execution of heretics can be seen on their website “The Josias”.<sup>12</sup> There, Pope Benedict XIV is praised for his coercive measures against heretics – including capital punishment<sup>13</sup> – and Pope Francis’s condemnation of the death penalty and the corresponding amendment to the Catechism is explicitly criticized. Under the section “Doubts and Objections,” it is laid out to what extent these changes introduced by Francis are, under certain conditions, not to be followed.<sup>14</sup> On his personal blog “Sanrucensis,” Edmund Waldstein writes openly in favor of the death penalty for heretics:

*All the baptized are subjects of the Church, and she should treat them prudently, as an abbot treats his monks. Sometimes this includes punishing them if they violate their baptismal obligations. The Church should be careful not to scrape off the rust too violently, lest she break the vessel. But she must also be mindful of Heli, who neglected to punish his sons, to the great detriment of the common good. In certain circumstances, this can mean that she needs to call in the secular arm to put heretics to death. This power can be abused, but it also has a legitimate use. In fact, one of the errors of Martin Luther, condemned by Pope Leo X is the proposition “That heretics be burned is against the will of the Spirit.”<sup>15</sup>*

**“They foster a climate in which believers may see themselves as justified in intimidating and threatening theological scholars.”**

When we look at the current developments – where colleagues are subjected to intimidation, attacks, and threats because of their theological research – such statements are cause for concern. They foster a climate in which believers – emboldened by spiritual authorities – may see themselves as justified in intimidating and threatening theological scholars. Waldstein’s networks within the Church also stand out in this regard: among the editors of his writings is a priest of the Archdiocese of Salzburg,<sup>16</sup> and one of the translators of his texts is Johannes Moravitz, a former lecturer in Heiligenkreuz, who now serves as European Affairs Officer for the Austrian Bishops’ Conference at COMECE (Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union), which has also been mentioned in connection with right-wing Christian networks.<sup>17</sup>

Outside the Church, Waldstein maintains networks reaching into Iran and the far-right scene, as can be seen in the Vienna-Qom Circle for Catholic–Shi’a Dialogue on Religion, Philosophy and Political Theory (ViQo Circle), which Waldstein founded.<sup>18</sup> According to Waldstein, “the Iranian Ayatollah regime is superior to Western liberalism... because it imposes religious rules on the population.”<sup>19</sup> Waldstein’s friend Adrian Vermeule, a constitutional law professor at Harvard and another leading integralist figure, states: “Islamic states have ‘the right model, but the wrong religion.’”<sup>20</sup> In 2020, the ViQo Circle hosted a conference titled “The Future of Religion in Secular Societies,” the proceedings of which were published by EOS Verlag.<sup>21</sup> The contributors include proponents of theocratic positions from both Islamic and Christian contexts, interspersed with far-right perspectives. Alongside Waldstein, David Engels – a prominent figure in the New Right – also appears as an author. The editor of the volume, Christian Machek, a former student of Heiligenkreuz, co-founded the ViQo Circle with Waldstein. Since 2012, he has held a teaching position in political philosophy at a seminary in Germany and is currently affiliated with “Europa Aeterna – Academy for Political Philosophy,” which draws on the ideas of David Engels and seeks to develop visions and concrete proposals for the future of Europe through right-wing and integralist philosophical, political, and theological education and formation.<sup>22</sup>

**“It is time to ask what ‘right’ faith is – and what claims it may (or may not) make.”**

A closer examination of right-wing Christian networks – which include various actors and groups within the Catholic Church – leads inevitably to Heiligenkreuz and Trumau as centers of integralist ideas. At the Catholic University ITI in Trumau, a congress was recently held under the patronage of Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Grand Chancellor of the university, that aimed at opposing the so-called “gender ideology.” Leading representatives of Catholic right-wing circles took part, including Gudrun Kugler, a Trumau alumna and politician who is also mentioned in the current Austrian report on right-wing extremism.<sup>23</sup> Schönborn has referred to Trumau as “a unique educational institution with great international appeal.”<sup>24</sup> A debate is needed about the nature of that appeal – what standards of scholarly and theological quality should apply, and which political agendas may (or may not) be associated with it. Anyone who affirms academic freedom and freedom of speech in a liberal democracy must engage with those groups within the Catholic Church that reject pluralism and may seek to suppress it violently. It is time to ask what “right” faith is – and what claims it may (or may not) make.

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Note: Following the publication of the German article on Feinschwarz, Heiligenkreuz stated that it had not paid enough attention to certain theological positions propagated by Edmund Waldstein and distanced itself from integralism. Edmund Waldstein’s statement on the death penalty for heretics cited in the German article was removed from Waldstein’s homepage. The Faculty of Theology at Innsbruck also distanced itself from Waldstein’s statements and advised him not to submit his habilitation in Innsbruck.

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<sup>1</sup> Gionathan Lo Mascolo (Hg.), *The Christian Right in Europe. Movements, Networks, and Denominations*, Bielefeld 2023; Hans-Ulrich Probst/Dominik Gautier/Karoline Ritter/Charlotte Jacobs (Hg.), *Topoi und Netzwerke der religiösen Rechten. Verbindende Feindbilder zwischen extremer Rechter und Christentum*, Bielefeld 2024; Kevin Vallier, *All the Kingdoms of the World. On Radical Religious Alternatives to Liberalism*, Oxford 2023; Thomas Schmidinger, “Wenn der Herrgott das Wichtigste auf der Welt ist.” *Katholischer Traditionalismus und Extremismus in Österreich*, Berlin 2023.

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- <sup>2</sup> James M. Patterson, Neo-Integralismus – Eine Gefahr für die liberale Demokratie, 4f., available at: <https://www.kas.de/de/web/geschichtsbewusst/zeitgeschichte-aktuell/detail/-/content/neo-integralismus-eine-gefahr-fuer-die-liberale-demokratie>; Neil Datta, Agenda Europe: ein extremistisches christliches Netzwerk im Herzen Europas, available at: <https://www.gwi-boell.de/de/2019/04/29/agenda-europe-ein-extremistisches-christliches-netzwerk-im-herzen-europas>. It also mentions connections as far as the Vatican.
- <sup>3</sup> Charlotte Jacobs/Karoline Ritter/Dominik Gautier/Hans-Ulrich Probst, Topoi und Netzwerke der religiösen Rechten, in: Hans-Ulrich Probst/Dominik Gautier/Karoline Ritter/Charlotte Jacobs (Hg.), Topoi und Netzwerke der religiösen Rechten. Verbindende Feindbilder zwischen extremer Rechter und Christentum, Bielefeld 2024, 11-23, 16f (translated from the German original: “Ökumene des Hasses”).
- <sup>4</sup> The Austrian Bishops' Conference explicitly distanced itself from Austrofascism in April 2024: <https://www.bischofskonferenz.at/148197/lackner-zu-austrofascismus-kirchliches-versagen-einbekennen>.
- <sup>5</sup> DÖW, Rechtsextremismus in Österreich 2023. Unter Berücksichtigung der Jahre 2020 bis 2022, Vienna 2025, available at: [https://www.doew.at/cms/download/2ga0l/rechtsextremismus\\_in\\_oe\\_2023.pdf](https://www.doew.at/cms/download/2ga0l/rechtsextremismus_in_oe_2023.pdf).
- <sup>6</sup> Eva Konzett, “Mönch der Macht. Wie ein österreichischer Mönch zum Stichwortgeber der US-Rechten wurde,” Falter 44, 2024, available at: <https://www.falter.at/zeitung/20241029/moench-der-macht>; Timothy Troutner, “The New Integralists. What they get wrong, and why we can’t ignore them,” Commonweal Magazine 2020, available at: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/new-integralists>; Vgl. auch Brigitte Theissl, “Theo Bros: Wie junge radikale Christen einen Gottesstaat errichten wollen,” Der Standard, 29 March 2025, available at: <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000263254/theo-bros-wie-junge-radikale-christen-einen-gottesstaat-errichten-wollen>.
- <sup>7</sup> Andreas Kemper, JD Vance, Austrofascismus und der antifeministische Hildebrand-Kreis, Compact 2024, available at: <https://blog.ccompact.de/2024/11/jd-vance-austrofascismus-antifeminismus-hildebrand/>; cf. also the Falter article mentioned in note 6.
- <sup>8</sup> In Germany, Peter Schallenberg, Professor of Moral Theology in Paderborn, sympathizes with integralism (cf. Peter Schallenberg, Staat, Kirche und Gnade. Der neokonservative katholische Integralismus in den USA, in: Herder Korrespondenz 3/25, 46-48).
- <sup>9</sup> Kevin Vallier, All the Kingdoms of the World. On Radical Religious Alternatives to Liberalism, Oxford 2023, 10.
- <sup>10</sup> Patterson, Neo-Integralismus.
- <sup>11</sup> The quote can be found in the article mentioned in note 6.
- <sup>12</sup> <https://thejosias.com>
- <sup>13</sup> <https://thejosias.com/2025/03/29/pope-benedict-xiv-on-state-coercion-of-heretics/>: “A different judgment is to be given concerning heretics or schismatics, for the agreed opinion of the Fathers and theologians is that after initial efforts, i.e. careful, mild and appropriate methods to dissuade them from error, have all been made to no avail, they can at length be compelled to the faith by threats and terrors, and if they are obstinate they can finally be punished by death by calling in the assistance of the secular arm.”
- <sup>14</sup> <https://thejosias.com/category/doubts-and-objections/>.
- <sup>15</sup> <https://sancrucensis.wordpress.com/2019/03/20/integralism-and-the-lamb-that-was-slain/>.
- <sup>16</sup> Edmund Waldstein, Integralismus und Freiheit, in: Alkuin Schachenmayr/Johannes Lackner (Hg.), Gesta Sanctottensis. Coleurwesen und Theologie, Münster 2021, 147-165.
- <sup>17</sup> Neil Datta/David Paternotte, “Gender Ideology” Battles in the European Bubble, in: Gionathan Lo Mascolo (Hg.), The Christian Right in Europe. Movements, Networks, and Denominations, Bielefeld 2023, 43-59, 46, 48.
- <sup>18</sup> <https://viquocircle.org/>.
- <sup>19</sup> Patterson, Neo-Integralismus, 21 (translated from the German original: “das iranische Ayatollah-Regime [sei] dem westlichen Liberalismus überlegen [...], weil es der Bevölkerung religiöse Regeln auferlege“).
- <sup>20</sup> Quoted in Patterson, Neo-Integralismus, 21 (translated from the German original: “islamische Staaten hätten ‘das richtige Modell, aber die falsche Religion.““).
- <sup>21</sup> <https://viquocircle.org/2021/07/24/the-future-of-faith-in-secular-society-proceedings-of-the-2020-viqo-conference-published/>.
- <sup>22</sup> <https://europa-aeterna.org/uber/>. Both Machek and Engels are also associated with the right-wing Catholic Renovatio Institute in Augsburg (<https://www.doew.at/erkennen/rechtsextremismus/neues-von-ganz-rechts/archiv/jaenner-2023/christliche-und-voelkische-abendlandretter-tagen-in-wien>).
- <sup>23</sup> DÖW, Rechtsextremismus in Österreich 2023, 117. The fact that Kugler is mentioned in the DÖW report is listed as a case of persecution of Christians by the Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe (OIDAC Europe). Martin Kugler, Gudrun Kugler's husband, who has been press spokesman of Opus Dei for decades, is president of OIDAC Europe: <https://www.intoleranceagainstchristians.eu/index.php?id=12&case=9519>.
- <sup>24</sup> <https://www.katholisch.at/aktuelles/143721/herzensanliegen-eines-heiligen-schoenborn-wuerdigt-hochschule-trumau> (translated from the German original: “einzigartige Bildungseinrichtung mit großer internationaler Strahlkraft“).