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# Religion in Austria

Volume 2



**PRAESENS VERLAG**

Published with support from the  
Kulturabteilung der Stadt Wien, Forschungs- und  
Wissenschaftsförderung



and the Research Platform *Religion and Transfor-  
mation in Contemporary European Society*



**Layout**

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**Bibliographic information published by the  
Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>

ISBN 978-3-7069-0836-8

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<http://www.praesens.at>

Vienna 2014

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## „Schlag-“wort Sekte.

by Patrick Warty. Schriftenreihe Colloquium Band 16.

Wien: Verlag Österreich, 2008. Pp. 359. ISBN: 978-3-7046-5217-1. €35.00

*Lukas Pokorny*

One of the principal procedural rules already taught to first-year Religious Studies students, be it in Austria or beyond, is to always critically examine and if necessary redefine theological loan words as well as popular labels prior to putting them to use (if at all). For many who keep going, this trained awareness evolves into a form of respondent conditioning triggering a rectifying urge when encountering scattered terms such as *Aberglaube* or *Sekte*. The latter in particular is a tenacious non-word, a red rag to most scholars of religion. Often used by careless theologians and non-specialists (unless applied in a strictly sociological context, which, admittedly, also has its flaws), the German designation *Sekte*—carrying roughly the same pejorative connotation like the English ‘cult’<sup>1</sup>—is still broadly to be found in the academia, let alone the popular science, the media and the wider public in general. The image so created and conveyed, especially by the media, of non-mainstream religious movements, perpetuates emotionally charged stereotyped narratives of old, further reinforcing marginalisation and stigmatisation and thus thwarting the mediating quest of our discipline. For instance, people have rarely heard of the Unification Movement/Church, yet the *Mun-Sekte*<sup>2</sup> is commonly known. Similarly *Ōmu Shinrikyō* is not familiar to most, whilst the *Aum-Sekte*<sup>3</sup>, which is often portrayed as the archetypal ‘destructive cult’ as a consequence of the toxic gas attacks in Japan that several members (following their leader’s order) carried out in the mid-1990s, is very well known. As with these two movements, in many cases the epithet *Sekte* has indeed become an identificatory part of the name when used in the demotic discourse—an identificatory element that negatively

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1 The same also applies to the Czech and Polish *sekta*, the Danish and Swedish *sekt*, the Dutch *sekte*, the Finnish *lahko*, the French *secte*, the Hungarian *szekta*, the Italian *setta*, the Russian *cekra*, and the Spanish *secta*, just to name a few.

2 *Mun* refers to the Unification Movement’s founder Mun Sŏn-myŏng (1920–2012).

3 *Aum* is the Germanisation of the ancient Indian spiritually laden syllable *om* (Sanskrit) of which *ōmu* as in *Ōmu Shinrikyō* is the Japanese pronunciation.

prefigures general opinion. *Sekte* mainly serves as an undifferentiated and foggy rubric for the strange *other*; an identifying mark, blindly scaring its target by negating disparity and fabricating a shared antinomian and dubious nature.

Patrick Warty follows this very assumption in his study in regard to the handling by the mass media. The starting point for his research, he explains, was the subjective feeling that the expression *Sekte* seems uniformly applied to quite varying traditions (p. 253). The term appears to be very vague but mostly negative in meaning on the one hand, and a veritable fighting word on the other, as the pun *Schlag-wort* (which alludes to a term that literally deals a blow or *Schlag*, that is, denounces or disparages) suggests (p. 15). Ultimately Warty aims to check the veracity of this initial impression. He rightly observes that in the Austrian context law scholars in particular critically engage with the topic, which is what motivated him to provide a first scholarly treatment from a Communication Studies perspective drawing on selected Austrian newspapers. Today, Warty (b. 1972) is an Assistant Professor in Commercial Law at the Department of Labour, Economic and European Law, University of Salzburg. He has an M.A. as well as a Ph.D. in Communication Studies (2001/2007) and Law (2006/2011), all from the University of Salzburg. The present book is a slightly revised version of his Ph.D. dissertation of 2007 entitled *Journalistische Qualität und die Reproduktion von Stereotypen im religiösen Minderheitendiskurs: semantische Analyse zur Erfassung des Bedeutungsgehalts des sprachlichen Ausdrucks 'Sekte' in der Berichterstattung der österreichischen Tagespresse* (*Journalistic Quality and the Reproduction of Stereotypes in the Religious Minority Discourse: A Semantic Analysis to Discern the Meaning of the Linguistic Expression 'Sekte' in the Reporting of Austrian Daily Press*). His current research focuses on civil and corporate law, and legal aspects pertaining to religious minorities. Warty's most recent contribution to the latter field comprise two articles (Warty 2014a and 2014b) in an edited volume on *Jehovas Zeugen in Österreich als Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts* (*Jehovah's Witnesses in Austria as a Public Corporation*).

In the introduction, Warty stresses that his study primarily addresses a scholarly audience. However, with the aim in mind to make it more accessible also for the general reader, he offers a brief reading guide and adds information boxes throughout the text which are supposed to elucidate key theoretical terms. The reading aids are well-intentioned yet of only little use to potentially ease text apprehension. Firstly, the (chiefly technical) terms and individual names singled out for further clarification in small grey boxes are chosen rather randomly. Secondly, the academic (and occasion-



ally flowery and unnecessarily intricate) style of language—my favourite here is *mephistophelisieren* (p. 229; English: ‘mephistophelise’)—does not allow for more accessibility, rendering the few helpful explanations given a proverbial drop in the ocean. Formally, the text is well-presented with a negligible number of typos and inaccuracies in terms of punctuation. The type face would have benefited from hyphenation; the resolution of the images included is too low.

At the centre of the study stands the quantitative analysis (Chapter 8; pp. 129-197) of four selected Austrian newspapers—two nationwide, *Die Presse* (299.000) and *Salzburger Nachrichten* (268.000), and two regional, *Kleine Zeitung* (831.000) and *Oberösterreichische Nachrichten* (371.000)—between 1998 and 2004.<sup>4</sup> Chapter 9 (pp. 198-212) supplements key narratives introduced in the previous chapter with a brief qualitative discussion. A detailed overview of the sampled reports, structured chronologically and geographically, is given in the Appendix (pp. 257-318). In the sample period Warts found 635 articles with respect to religious groups labelled as *Sekte*, 40% of which were published in *Oberösterreichische Nachrichten* and 31% in *Die Presse*. He sees an explanation for the disproportional spread in the former’s local focus (creating a monitoring and ‘warning’ function) on the one hand, and the latter’s often more scientific approach (in which the designation *Sekte* is commonly used rather as a sociological categorisation) on the other hand (p. 164). A major limitation of the study, also recognised by its author (p. 32), connects to the sample, which is not representative of the Austrian media landscape. The four newspapers chosen are (largely) liberal-aligned, yet the market leader, *Kronen Zeitung* (2.967.000),<sup>5</sup> which boasts more readers than all other Austrian dailies combined, is a tabloid notorious for its populist style. This means that whatever the outcome of the research, the semantic evaluation would most likely turn out to be much less favourable if it were to encompass the tabloid segment of newspapers so as to establish a higher level of representation.

As mentioned above, the main purpose of the study is to investigate the character and meaning ordinarily attributed to a *Sekte* in (a sizeable portion of) the coverage of Austrian daily press. In so doing, a number of mostly negative ascriptions (or ‘narratives’) regularly encountered (in anti-cult literature and according to scholarship) are formulated. These stereotypes hereafter serve as a thematic grid in the analysis of the collected samples. The results of the empirical evaluation essentially show a significant fre-

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4 The numbers in brackets indicate the estimated readership as of 2004 according to ‘Media-Analyse’. Cf. <http://www.media-analyse.at> (accessed: June 11, 2014).

5 In addition, the two largest liberal papers distributed nationwide are missing, namely *Kurier* (700.000; centre right) and *Der Standard* (366.000; left liberal).

quency of the following narratives: dangerousness/conflictivity (63%), irrational worldview (60%), and, albeit to a lesser extent, deprivation of free will (38%).<sup>6</sup> As far as the data is concerned, Warty concludes that the label *Sekte* is indeed predominantly utilised in an adverse and derogatory sense in Austrian dailies (p. 256). Additional results shall further confirm this assessment: 28% of the articles include a reference to a (cult) leader or *guru*; in only 3% of the sample is the term *Sekte* understood as a splinter group of a parent religious group; in 90% no indication is made to any aspect of the relevant belief system; finally, in 87% no emic statement, that is, a statement generated by the group itself is included in the report.

As for regional composition, 27% of the articles refer to movements in Austria; the same value is given for reports on East Asian groups, which can be explained by crucial historical events close to (*Ōmu Shinrikyō*'s sarin attack on the Tōkyō subway in 1995) and during (*Fālún Gōng*'s crackdown by the Chinese government in 1999 and its persecution thereafter) the sample period involving new religious movements. In general, there are more reports on groups outside of than within Europe. Another question raised by Warty was whether the predicate *Sekte* were also used in conjunction with religious movements which had been officially acknowledged by the Austrian authorities as *gesetzlich anerkannte Religionsgesellschaft* (Legally Recognised Religious Society) or *eingetragene Bekenntnisgemeinschaft* (Registered Confessional Community). Warty ascertained that in 1.4% of the complete sample such connection was made, a value increasing to 6.7% when limiting the reports to groups in Austria. Despite the reduced validity of the latter value (owing to an insufficient sample) and the comparatively low percentage in both cases, as Warty argues, it is particularly problematic that groups which have attained this legally approved status (that is, having been ascribed a level of 'innocuousness' by the state) still receive the tag *Sekte* by parts of the media. Ultimately he recommends that this depreciatory appellation should not be used in the media in tandem with any religious group whatsoever, and instead the media should turn towards more neutral terminology such as *Bekenntnisgemeinschaft* (Confessional Community) or *religiöse Gemeinschaft* (Religious Community) amongst others, in order to fulfil its educational role within the scope of a democratic system (p. 256). Personally, I wholeheartedly endorse this conclusion, even if I would not (however slightly) differentiate in terms of legal status and as such demarcate recognised religions from others like, for example, religious

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<sup>6</sup> In contrast, a reference to the narrative of 'profiteering' was only found in 14% of the articles.

groups which incorporated as associations, when branding the common ignorance in the use and the exploitation of the term *Sekte*.

The backdrop to the quantitative analysis and its qualitative considerations in Chapters 4-6 (pp. 42-109) is largely a *tour d'horizon* of semiotic and communicological basics, forming an important theoretical bracket. Warto succinctly explores the dynamics of language and (journalistic) discourse, and their defining impact on a recipient's imagery. Notably, he contends that the eminent lack of conceptual clarity—inviting wide generalisation and oversimplification in defiance of variety—would make the label *Sekte* impractical in the first place. Next to these useful preliminary theoretical reflections, Warto also includes a brief historical survey (Chapter 7; pp. 110-129) in which he touches upon the formative elements of a religio-cultural Austrian mind-set. Amplifying the specifically Austrian context, and certainly of interest for the student of religion in Austria, Warto thereafter (Chapter 10; pp. 212-215) adds a summary of an interview related to the study topic conducted with the then-head of the *Referat für Weltanschauungsfragen der Erzdiözese Salzburg* (Department for Questions about World Views of the Catholic Archdiocese of Salzburg). In addition, the Appendix contains two legal texts; firstly (pp. 318-325) the federal law passed in 1998 concerning the establishment of a government-affiliated documentation and information office relating to sect affairs (BGBl I 150/1998)—*Bundesgesetz über die Einrichtung einer Dokumentations- und Informationsstelle für Sektenfragen (Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen)*—and secondly (pp. 326-332), the *Bundesgesetz über die Rechtspersönlichkeit von religiösen Bekenntnisgemeinschaften* (Federal Law concerning the Legal Entity of Religious Confessional Communities) of 1998 (BGBl I 19/1998).

„Schlag-“wort *Sekte* is without doubt an important book based on generally sound scholarship. Although the empirical part is (deliberately) limited, since it fails to represent the entire Austrian daily press (one wonders why), the findings already suggest that the big picture—that is, the picture that would emerge if the study were to encompass the tabloid press—would presumably be even less favourable. One shortcoming is that the contribution of Religious Studies (*Religionswissenschaft*) especially to the *Sek-tendiskurs* is utterly ignored. At this point, a reference to ‘Religious Studies literature’ which apparently would at times also recognise an ‘inherent danger’ of a *Sekte* (p. 95) is certainly telling, especially considering that this is then exemplified by a publication of a well-known dignitary of the Protestant Church in Austria. One cannot help but get the impression that Warto simply fails to notice Religious Studies as an independent scholarly discipline. In the end, however, Warto's conclusion makes up for this, being a

very well-founded plea against the use of the pejorative *Sekte* in the (German language) media. Let us hope that his ‘recommendation’ will be heard.

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