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## CHRISTIAN EUROPE? THE USE AND ABUSE OF CHRISTIAN VALUES AND THE POPULIST DEBATE

### Populism and Christianity

The terms “Christian values” and “Christian Europe” are in constant use in populist rhetoric, especially in public speeches and arguments. This is somewhat new in highly secular Europe. One of the first postwar European populists to invoke Christian rhetoric for political ends was Jean-Marie Le Pen, who represented “French values” as consonant with those of Christianity and the Catholic Church. His daughter, Marine Le Pen, frightened her believers by continuously referring to the “occupation” of France by 14 million Muslims and the transformation of Christian, French, and Western cultures by “Islamic France.” This supposed occupation, she predicted in 1990, will “eradicate all that links France to Western, humanist and Christian civilisation.”<sup>1</sup> More recently, Geert Wilders of the Netherlands stressed that Islam posed a dire threat to Judeo-Christian society in his country.<sup>2</sup>

Let me quote at some length from *The Paris Statement*, a recent populist manifesto signed in Paris by 13 populist politicians from across Europe. The declaration is a clear rejection, under the banner of Christianity, of universalism (including universal human rights) and multiculturalism. The signatories allege that their repudiation of the European Union (EU) is a consequence of the “decline of Christian faith” in Europe:

The true Europe has been marked by Christianity. The universal spiritual empire of the Church brought cultural unity to Europe, but did so without political empire. This has allowed for particular civic loyalties to flourish within a shared European culture. ... It is no accident that the decline of Christian faith in Europe has been accompanied by renewed efforts to establish political unity—an empire of money and regulations, covered

with sentiments of pseudo-religious universalism, that is being constructed by the European Union. ... The true Europe affirms the equal dignity of every individual, regardless of sex, rank or race. This also arises from our Christian roots. Our gentle virtues are of an unmistakably Christian heritage: fairness, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, peace-making, charity. Christianity revolutionized the relationship between men and women, valuing love and mutual fidelity in an unprecedented way. ... [T]he Christian legacy of humane and dignified life, a living engagement with our Classical inheritance—all this is slipping away. As the patrons of the false Europe construct their faux Christendom of universal human rights, we are losing our home. ... Europe's multicultural enterprise, which denies the Christian roots of Europe, trades on the Christian ideal of universal charity in an exaggerated and unsustainable form. It requires from the European peoples a saintly degree of self-abnegation. We are to affirm the very colonization of our homelands.<sup>3</sup>

According to the populist manifesto, Christian Europe is the “true Europe,” while the EU is a “false Europe.”

The populist movements, however, are ambivalent on the issue of “Christian identity.” As a European University Institute analysis maintains, they all reject Islam as “non-European,” but some of them fight for the re-Christianization of societies (like the Polish populists). Others defend a Christian identity without faith (the Lega [Nord] in Italy and the FPÖ in Austria), while still others endorse contemporary secular values (such as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands). In France, Marine Le Pen currently also defends “laïcité” (secularism) as the root of the French identity (while her niece and the rising star of the Front National, Marion Maréchal Le Pen, promotes an old view of France with churches, processions, and a ban on abortion).

Generally speaking, however, when populists promote Christianity, it is in the form of a folkloric popular religion that uses the cross as a political symbol but ignores the teachings of the Church. It often fights against clerical authorities who call for hospitality to migrants and refugees. In fact, this Christian identity may run contrary to Christianity as Pope Francis interprets it.

As a matter of fact, the “European values” referred to after World War II were not associated with Christianity but were instead based on three pillars: political liberalism; human rights; and, less explicitly, strong state welfare policies. As human rights are by definition secular—that is, independent of any religion—in a sense, they epitomize the postwar European identity. Proponents initially established European human rights in opposition to totalitarian ideologies rather than religious beliefs. Since the 1980s, however, pro-human rights leaders have also advocated for the taming of religious norms perceived as oppositional (such as women's unequal status in some religious sects or freedom of speech limitations).<sup>4</sup>

## A special feature of East European nationalist interpretations of Christianity

Although all contemporary populists cultivate the idea of a “Christian nation,” it is much more frequent in Central and Eastern Europe, where the concept of the “Christian nation” has a centuries-old tradition. It originated during the long wars with the Ottoman Empire but gained new virulence after World War I in anti-Semitic and anti-communist contexts (Christianity against faithless communism). Modern propagandistic invocations of Christianity have thus been integrated into nationalist self-identification since the interwar decades.

Although it disappeared for half a century after World War II, the “Christian Nation” slogan reemerged in early twenty-first century right-wing, proto-authoritarian regimes like Hungary and Poland. When Viktor Orbán, who was previously not religious at all, gained power in Hungary, he declared that “we may finally build ... a national Christian era.”<sup>5</sup> A few years later, he praised his regime, saying, “within three years the civic-Christian government [has] led the country out of this hopeless, ruinous situation.”<sup>6</sup> During the migration crisis of the mid-2010s, Christianity became a leading slogan against immigration: “Masses arriving from other civilizations endanger our way of life, our culture, our custom and our Christian tradition.”<sup>7</sup>

In November 2012, Prime Minister Orbán went even further with his “Christian” national ideology. In his address at the fourteenth Congress of Catholics and Public Life in Madrid, entitled “Hope and Christian Response to the Crisis,” he hailed a return to the principles of Christendom as Europe’s only chance for salvation. He even argued that the economic depression undermining the European economy

has not come by chance but by carelessness, the neglect of their responsibilities by leaders who have called into question the Christian roots, that is, the driving force that made European unity, the family, work and credit possible. ... These values transformed the old continent into an ‘economic power,’ thanks to the development of those days being made in accordance with those principles.<sup>8</sup>

Jaroslav Kaczyński, a close follower of Orbán, was elected to power with the program of “combating the de-christianisation of Poland.”<sup>9</sup> His government launched harsh anti-abortion laws and a cultural war against modernity. It pays to quote one of his anti-modernization tirades: “We only want to cure our country of a few illnesses,” such as the

new mixture of cultures and races, a world made up of cyclists and vegetarians, who only use renewable energy and who battle all signs of religion. ... What moves most Poles [is] tradition, historical awareness, love of country, faith in God and normal family life between a woman and a man.<sup>10</sup>

Kaczyński's new handpicked Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, while he started working on destroying the independence of the judiciary, in his first TV interview called for the "rechristianisation" of Europe since "in many places carols are not sung, churches are empty and are being turned into museums."<sup>11</sup>

While Kaczyński is a deeply religious man, Orbán and Vladimir Putin, the former Soviet KGB officer, previously had nothing to do with religion. Both of them, however, pretend to be religious for political ends. Putin is often photographed crossing himself at Orthodox services or standing alongside Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church. They mutually assist one another. Putin has helped to rebuild the Church, which was destroyed during the communist period. In 1988, the millennium anniversary of Russia's Christianization, the Orthodox Church was in ruins, with only 76 eparchies (their version of dioceses) remaining in the country. By 2016, that number had jumped to 293; relatedly, in 1988, there were 6,674 priests, whereas by 2016, that number had increased to 35,000. In exchange, the Orthodox Church supports Putin's policies, including the incorporation of Crimea.<sup>12</sup> More importantly, the non-centralized Orthodox Church, which has more than a dozen self-governing eparchies in Eastern Europe and the Balkans (each with its own patriarch), is still under the strong influence of the powerful Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow. The Moscow Church is in close contact with the eparchies of Ukraine; Moldova; and other, now independent countries from former Soviet republics. Together these religious organizations are helping Putin in his efforts to recreate the former empire. The Orthodox Church is also an envoy of Putin in the Balkans and supports Putin's European policies as well.

Christianity and Christian values thus became a major pillar of populist rhetoric and policy everywhere in Eastern Europe. Right-wing leaders used Christianity as a political weapon in order to gain mass popular support.

## **What are Christian values, and how do they influence European life?**

There is, naturally, no place in this chapter for a detailed philosophical or theological discussion. From a historical perspective, however, Christianity broadly defined is central to European history. From the eleventh century onwards, Europe was indeed rarely called Europe but "Christianitas" (Christendom). Nevertheless, in modern times—beginning a few centuries ago but increasingly in the postwar decades—there has been a trend toward a secular, less religious Europe.

When discussing this issue, one has to ask the evident question: what kind of Christian values? One might just as easily focus on the tolerance of the early Christians or today's Vatican, on the one hand, as on the well-known intolerance of the medieval Church and the Inquisition, on the other.

Furthermore, one has to ask what the so-called Christian values mean for daily European life: does it influence daily eating habits, like Judaism or Islam do? Does it regulate clothing customs (as do Orthodox Jews, Saudi Muslims, Indian Sikhs, and people in many other religious cultures)? Does it influence science, business, politics, or economics? The Church was strongly against science for centuries, rejecting several key scientific discoveries as sins against God. The Church forbade moneylending with interest (usury), a ban that stifled banking activities in general, on the premise that it was unchristian, which shifted these activities into non-Christian domains. The Catholic Church has basically preserved its medieval feudal structure, in sharp contrast to the democratic political structures of Europe. European values, in reality, formed and emerged as the Catholic Church started losing its firm grip upon European life. It is an oft-mentioned commonplace that modern European values trace their origins to a mixture of Greek philosophy, Judaism, Christianity, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. The dominating values of democracy and human rights for all people (including non-male and minority populations) regardless of religion actually stem much more from the Enlightenment than from Christianity. The prospective but ultimately down-voted constitution of the EU rightly based European values on the complex “cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe.”<sup>13</sup>

Today the Catholic Church is strongly opposed to many of the populist politics that run under the banner of Christianity, including on several debated issues including immigration.

### **Pope Francis’s differing interpretation of Christian Europe**

It is valuable to compare populist “Christianity” with the Vatican’s interpretation of Christianity. The Argentinian Jesuit Pope Francis, in his message at the Day of Migration and Refugees on August 15, 2017, quoted Leviticus and Matthew: “You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (*Leviticus* 19:34). “Every stranger who knocks at our door is an opportunity for an encounter with Jesus Christ, who identifies with the welcomed and rejected strangers of every age” (*Matthew* 25:35–43). The Pope added, “In this regard, I wish to reaffirm that our shared response may be articulated by four verbs: *to welcome, to protect, to promote and to integrate.*”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in an address to a gathering of European cardinals in 2017, Pope Francis discussed the value of community and peace, emphasized the value of the EU in these respects, and stressed the importance of inclusiveness and acceptance of “strangers.” The Pope’s Christianity is the exact opposite of populist “Christianity.” Pope Francis said:

The contribution that Christians can make to the future of Europe, then, is to help recover the sense of belonging to a community. It is not by chance

that the founders of the European project chose that very word to identify the new political subject coming into being. ... This leads us to reflect on the positive and constructive role that religion in general plays in the building up of society. I think, for example, of the contribution made by interreligious dialogue to greater mutual understanding between Christians and Muslims in Europe. ... Leaders together share responsibility for promoting a Europe that is an *inclusive* community, free of one fundamental misunderstanding: namely that inclusion does not mean downplaying differences. On the contrary, a community is truly inclusive when differences are valued and viewed as a shared source of enrichment. Seen in this way, migrants are more a resource than a burden. Christians are called to meditate seriously on Jesus' words: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me' (Mt 25:35). ... A Europe that rediscovers itself as a community will surely be a *source of development* for herself and for the whole world. ... Finally, the commitment of Christians in Europe must represent a *promise of peace*. This was the central concern that inspired the signatories of the Treaties of Rome. After two World Wars and atrocious acts of violence perpetrated by peoples against peoples, the time had come to affirm the right to peace. For it is a right. Yet today we continue to see how fragile is that peace, and how particular and national agendas risk thwarting the courageous dreams of the founders of Europe."<sup>15</sup>

Populism uses Christianity as a political weapon. The populist leaders' Christianity is diametrically opposed to the Pope's interpretation of scripture. Unfortunately, a large number of churches in most Central and Eastern European countries are allied with, and often directly serve, autocratic leaders and governments.

## Notes

- 1 Marine Le Pen, *Identité*, No.6 (April 1990).
- 2 "CONCEPT – VERKIEZINGSPROGRAMMA PVV 2017–2021" (Partij voor de Vrijheid), accessed June 20, 2018, [www.pvv.nl/images/Conceptverkiezingsprogramma.pdf](http://www.pvv.nl/images/Conceptverkiezingsprogramma.pdf).
- 3 Philippe Bénétou et al., "The Paris Statement," October 4, 2017, <https://thetrueeurope.eu/a-europe-we-can-believe-in/>.
- 4 Olivier Roy, "The (re)construction and Formatting of Religions in the West through Courts, Social Practices, Public Discourse and Transnational Institutions," *Research Project ReligioWest* (European University Institute, March 2016), [www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/RW-rethinking-the-place-of-religion.pdf](http://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/RW-rethinking-the-place-of-religion.pdf).
- 5 "Mass Migration Can Indeed Be Stopped," *Hungarian Prime Minister's Office*, March 1, 2016, [www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/news/mass-migration-can-indeed-be-stopped](http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/news/mass-migration-can-indeed-be-stopped).
- 6 Viktor Orbán, "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's State of the Nation Address" (Budapest, February 28, 2016), [www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-state-of-the-nation-address](http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-state-of-the-nation-address).

- 7 Dzsihadfigyelo, trans., “The Full Text of Viktor Orbán’s Speech,” Translated Speech Transcript (Gates of Vienna, March 19, 2016), <https://gatesofvienna.net/2016/03/the-full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech/>.
- 8 “Viktor Orban on Christian Europe,” *Unam Sanctam Catholicam*, accessed June 20, 2018, [www.unamsanctamcatholicam.com/social-teaching/moral-issues/93-social-teaching/moral-issues/354-viktor-orban-on-christian-europe.html](http://www.unamsanctamcatholicam.com/social-teaching/moral-issues/93-social-teaching/moral-issues/354-viktor-orban-on-christian-europe.html).
- 9 Pawel Sobczak and Justyna Pawlak, “Divisive Kaczynski Shuns Limelight in Polish Election,” *Reuters*, October 23, 2015, [www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-election-kaczynski/divisive-kaczynski-shuns-limelight-in-polish-election-idUSKCN0SH20N20151023](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-election-kaczynski/divisive-kaczynski-shuns-limelight-in-polish-election-idUSKCN0SH20N20151023).
- 10 Jan Cienski, “Polish Conservative’s PR Pushback,” *Politico*, January 4, 2016, [www.politico.eu/article/poland-nato-bases-germany-pis-waszczykowski-commission/](http://www.politico.eu/article/poland-nato-bases-germany-pis-waszczykowski-commission/).
- 11 “Poland’s Prime Minister Gets the Chop.”
- 12 Gregory Freeze, “The Russian Orthodox Church: Putin Ally or Independent Force?” *Religion & Politics*, October 10, 2017, <http://religionandpolitics.org/2017/10/10/the-russian-orthodox-church-putin-ally-or-independent-force>.
- 13 “Preamble to the Treaty of Lisbon” (European Union), accessed June 20, 2018, [www.lisbon-treaty.org/wcm/the-lisbon-treaty/treaty-on-european-union-and-comments/preamble.html](http://www.lisbon-treaty.org/wcm/the-lisbon-treaty/treaty-on-european-union-and-comments/preamble.html).
- 14 Pope Francis, “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees” (104th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, Vatican City, August 15, 2017), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170815\\_world-migrants-day-2018.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20170815_world-migrants-day-2018.html).
- 15 Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Community” ([Re]Thinking Europe – a Christian Contribution to the Future of the European Project, Vatican City, October 28, 2017), [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20171028\\_conferenza-comece.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/october/documents/papa-francesco_20171028_conferenza-comece.html).