

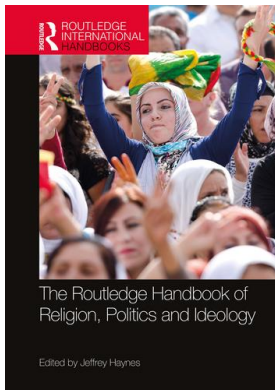
This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

On: 24 Mar 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Politics and Ideology

Jeffrey Haynes

Christianism

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780367816230-18>

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Published online on: 15 Aug 2021

How to cite :- Ben Ryan. 15 Aug 2021, *Christianism from:* The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Politics and Ideology Routledge

Accessed on: 24 Mar 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780367816230-18>

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15

CHRISTIANISM

Ben Ryan

The term “Christianism” has been in use for some years. At least as early as 2003 in the American context, the journalist Andrew Sullivan was using it in relation to the American Christian right on his personal blog. Sullivan expanded on the idea in a *Time Magazine* piece in 2006 (Sullivan, 2006). Its usage in the European political sphere had been more limited until 2017, when the sociologist Rogers Brubaker re-coined the phrase in the context of populist movements in Europe (Brubaker, 2017a). The two uses denote, as explained below, different, though related phenomena. The American religious right and the populist Christianists share some common language and aspirations to power but are otherwise quite distinct both in their intellectual heritage, the depth of their piety and in their specific political aims.

In this chapter, I am following Brubaker in treating Christianism as an identitarian movement that considers Christianity as a civilizational marker of a pure people counterposed against an outside threat (most particularly Islam). Unlike the American religious right, this identitarian Christianity is fundamentally secular in its outlook, largely divorced from institutional church networks and comfortable inhabiting a language of liberalism (particularly on LGBT issues). Unlike historic and contemporary Christian nationalist movements, it is largely willing to leave in place the structures of the liberal state and is more internationalist, seeing itself as a protector of a Western Christendom than having a specific nationalist agenda.

What ought to be immediately apparent from these distinctions is that this is not an easy designation but part of a sliding scale of differing movements that often defy easy categorization. By and large, those looking to corral the contemporary populist right into easy boxes for academic comparison struggle for the simple reason that there is little coherent ideological basis to much contemporary populism, and such as there is, is often prone to being overthrown or shifted by the personalities who are critical to such movements (Rooduijn, 2018), (Norris, 2019).

In truth, though the methodological challenges also reflect the struggles of a large part of contemporary political thought to deal with the perceived irrationality of either ideology or religion, this is not a new challenge. The anthropologist Louis Dumont recognized the challenge with ideology in the 1970s:

I do not consider as an ideology everything that is left over once that which is supposed to be true, rational and scientific has been accounted for. Quite the contrary, it

is everything that has been thought through at a social level, which has been believed, and acted upon based on the hypothesis that constitutes a living unity.

(Dumont, 1977, p. 31)

This is a helpful and thoroughly unheeded warning. It is a tribute to the extent to which political theory remains, as Francis Fukuyama has long argued (Fukuyama, 1989). It is unconsciously devoted to a Hegelian (or, perhaps more accurately still, a Christian teleological) sense of history developing epoch by epoch towards a rational end that what seems fundamentally reactionary and irrational in populism is derided in so much academic analysis.

To this, we can add that the one thing considered more irrational and reactionary than ideology and, accordingly, dismissed by much of political and social science, is religion. Combine the two, populist politics and religion, and it is little wonder that there is such confusion and conflating of related but distinct phenomena as the American “religious right” and the identitarian “Christianists”. It is also at the root of why these movements have proven so difficult to confront by liberal establishment politicians in a host of contexts.

This chapter seeks to more clearly differentiate the underpinnings of the Christianist movement by exploring its common features while recognizing the difficulties in clear dividing lines with other related movements. It does this first through an analysis of how Christianity, unlike other religious ideologies, relates (or perhaps more accurately does not relate) to Christianity and the institutional churches. Second, through looking at its relation to Islam. Finally, it seeks to put this movement into historical context, analyzing the extent to which this represents a new phenomenon and how it differs from rival right-wing Christian projects.

Differentiating Christianity

Brubaker identifies the Christianists by a number of common features (Brubaker, 2017a) (Brubaker, 2017b). Chiefly he identifies Christianity with a view of Christianity as civilizational rather than necessarily religious (i.e., defining who we are as a collective narrative of identity, support for secularism, and a secularized view of religion). To this, he adds several other common features including a commitment to at least some tenets of liberalism, philo-Semitism and most, importantly, since it underpins everything else, a vehement opposition to Islam. Islam is in many ways the glue for everything. In Brubaker’s model:

“Christianism” as I term it ... is a matter of belonging rather than believing, a way of defining “us” in relation to “them”. If “they” are Muslim, then “we” the Europeans must in some sense be Christian, but that does not mean we must be religious”.

(Brubaker, 2017a)

Elsewhere, in an interview for *The Atlantic*, Brubaker expands on that thought to reiterate that what he is defining as Christianity is a fundamentally negative creed – a statement of what is not, rather than a substantive claim to Christianity: “It’s a secularized Christianity as culture ... It’s a matter of belonging rather than believing ... We are Christians precisely because they are Muslims. Otherwise, we are not Christian in any substantive sense” (Green, 2017).

There are several aspects to draw out here which are essential. The first is that the Christianists treat Christianity as a civilizational marker. In this, they closely reflect the famous clash of civilizations thesis of Samuel Huntington (Huntington, 1993). Huntington proposed that the 21st-century would be defined less by a clash of ideology and more by competing civilizations, where civilization is marked by the cultural inheritances and identities of people who share historical,

territorial and linguistic characteristics. Most important in this, Huntington insists, is religion, as a marker more essential even than ethnicity in creating insiders and outsiders. This taps precisely into the Christianist view of a world of competing and fundamentally opposed civilizational cultures that mark Christianity as the West and Islam as an alien other. Some have made the link with Huntington not only consciously but explicitly. Pym Fortuyn, the charismatic far-right Dutch politician who was in many ways ahead of his time as a forerunner of the current Christianists before his assassination in 2002, for example, referred to himself on a number of occasions as the “Huntington of Dutch politics”.

There is nothing especially radical in the claim that Europe, or the West, is a fundamentally Christian space defined by a history and theology to such a degree that it is in some sense haunted by Christianity, even its most virulent secularism (Taylor, 2007). The distinctive edge of Christianity is not the claim that the West is Christian but that this identity is sufficiently thick, and other civilizations (particularly Islam) so alien that they are utterly incompatible to the extent that the presence of Islam in the West is fundamentally threatening.

In this, Christianists often lean on the “*Grand Remplacement*” (“the Great Replacement”) theory, best associated with Renaud Camus’s book of the same title (Camus, 2011). Camus’s argument, that mass migration and Islam in particular pose both a demographic and cultural threat to the West, has been taken up by a number of right-wing campaigns, including into the rallying chant of “you will not replace us” from parts of the American far right. It has also been satirized (though the author stresses he deems it plausible) in Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission* (Houellebecq, 2015). An equivalent Anglo-American trend is found in writers such as Douglas Murray (Murray, 2017) writing on Europe and in an even more alarmist American trend, Robert Spencer (Spencer, 2008).

This taps into the second radical aspect to the civilizational claim of the Christianists, which is that, as captured by Brubaker’s distinction, this is a negative identity claim. The threat of a proposed other to the status quo puts less of an emphasis on the need to present a coherent alternative to the current political model. Christianists can lay rhetorical claim both to being anti-establishment and to being the best chance of maintaining the established liberal democratic model against alien invaders. The Christianists, as we shall explore in much more depth below, do not offer much of a theological view of what a Christian West ought to look like.

The term “Christianism” is, in this sense, a deliberate mirroring of the term “Islamism”. Like Islamism, Christianism is generally applied pejoratively (nobody, to my knowledge, self-defines as either an Islamist or a Christianist) and in ways that are often convenient for believers of those faiths as much as outsiders. By this, I mean that the term is deliberately used to differentiate between the faith (Islam or Christianity) and a political movement that claims an attachment to that faith but which other believers seek to disown (Islamism or Christianism). It is convenient for many people to be able to draw a line between authentic belief (and theo-political visions derived from that belief) and an extremist political vision that claims to derive from the faith but which is represented as a distortion. In truth, it is usually more difficult to wholly disentangle the faith from the extremist political movement. Hannah Strommen and Ulrich Schmiedel have been critical of the use of the term precisely because it seeks to deny any culpability on the part of religions themselves for the extremist political use of their theologies (Strommen & Schmiedel, 2020).

This correctly points to the methodological problem in trying to identify and differentiate Christianists from other far-right Christian movements. There are politicians who can readily be identified as never having had much obvious piety or even openly declared themselves as not being religious, who have come to argue vociferously for a Christian West in need of defence (Matteo Salvini, in Italy, who for years was openly a neo-pagan, Marine Le Pen, in France, Lutz

Bachmann in Germany and Donald Trump in the US being four prominent examples). There are others though who can fairly be said to have always consistently and publicly been Christian, such as Marion Maréchal in France and Norbert Hofer of Austria. Without putting windows into souls, it is always difficult to identify exactly who sees Christianity purely in cultural terms and for whom it is a deeply held belief. We have to treat Christianity in some ways as no more than an imperfect heuristic tool to differentiate between different factions and individuals while recognizing that the reality will be more of a sliding scale.

The relationship between Christianity and the Church

Perhaps the single biggest differentiator between Christianists and other right-wing Christian movements (e.g., the American religious right or the East European Christian nationalists) lies in the relationship between their movements and the Church. There are three features to this. First, is the ambiguity of Christian belief in Christianity. Second, the specific interactions and tensions between churches and Christianists. Finally, attitudes towards secularism.

Belonging, not believing

On the first note, part of the corollary of seeing Christianity as a cultural marker is a corresponding reduced relevance of belief. If religious identity can be divided according to belonging and believing (Davie, 1994), then the Christianists have taken the belonging end to a cultural extreme. This transition in parts of the far right towards seeing Christianity as a critical marker of cultural identity has been developing for some time. It matches a broader trend apparent since the 1980s of the far right downplaying previous explicitly racialized narratives of outsiders and moving to cultural norms instead – a process dubbed by Rita Chin as the “new racism” (Chin, 2017).

Typical in this trend have been the changes in the French *Rassemblement National* (RN) (previously *Front National*) party and the Italian *Lega* party. The former, when led by Jean-Marie Le Pen was openly anti-Semitic and favoured racialized definitions of the French and non-French. Under his daughter, Marine Le Pen, the rhetoric and messaging have been carefully and deliberately shifted. Anti-Semitic elements (at least the explicit ones) have been largely expunged, and the party has shifted its emphasis to cultural markers, not least, and as we shall see without apparent paradox, to being the champions of both Catholic France and *laïcité* (Roy, 2016). Similarly, the *Lega* party for most of their history have been more noted for their enthusiasm for neo-pagan symbolism, but since 2000 have gradually reinvented themselves as protectors of Catholic Italy from heathen invaders (McDonnell, 2016).

Unlike other right-wing groups such as the American religious right, Christianists have developed a thick cultural sense of Christianity as belonging accompanying a tepid, or even non-existent, sense of Christianity as believing. The founder of PEGIDA, Lutz Bachmann, for example, is open about not belonging to any church, even as his organization campaigns to protect Christian Europe from Islamic invasion. The trend extends beyond the leadership of these parties and groups to their supporters.

The supporters of populist right-wing parties are disproportionately made up of men and women who are disconnected from religious institutions, though they may (and often do) still consider themselves Christians when filling in surveys – adding weight to the idea that this is Christianity as belonging over believing. Indeed, perhaps counter-intuitively, data suggest that in terms of religiosity, the voters of the populist right are actually less religious even than voters for European socialist parties (Guth & Nelsen, 2019).

Regular church attendance has been found to have an “immunization effect” against the appeal of right-wing populist parties (Arzheimer & Carter, 2009), (Immerzeel, Jaspers, & Lubbers, 2013). This is particularly true in contexts where there are traditional Christian conservative political parties (e.g., in Germany and the Netherlands). In these places, church attendance is a significant and disproportionate barrier to supporting the populist right. However, nominal Christians are more likely to see an appeal in Christianist politicians and movements, particularly in countries with a strong tie between national identity and denominational confession (e.g., Italian Catholicism and Norwegian Lutheranism).

Clashes with the churches

Particularly significant as part of the immunization effect is that where mainstream churches have been vociferous critics of the populist right, it has a particularly strong effect on church-attending Christians and their opposition to far-right populist parties (Marzouki, McDonnell, & Roy, 2016). Here we see one of the critical dividing lines between Christianity and the American religious right or Christian nationalists in Poland and Russia. In the latter cases, the political movements are closely tied to, and supported by, churches. True, there are other churches (particularly in the American context) that loudly condemn these political movements, but nevertheless, there remains significant mainstream denominational support for many of their campaigns and often whole political parties (the success of the American religious right in the 1990s and 2000s rested on finally achieving a unity of political purpose, if not a religious one, between conservative Catholic and Evangelical leaders). In contrast, one would struggle to find any Christian leader in the UK who did not vociferously condemn the far-right British National Party (BNP) and only marginal clerical voices in the Italian and French Catholic Churches who are not consistently opposed to the RN. In Germany, both the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* and the Catholic Church have publicly condemned and released official resources countering PEGIDA and the *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)*. Equivalent examples can be found across Western and Northern Europe. Tensions flair particularly over attitudes towards migrants and refugees.

One result of this is that some Christianists have begun to characterize the churches themselves as part of the elite liberal state that acquiesces to Islamification and the undermining of European culture. The *AfD* in Germany has been perhaps the most vociferous in condemning the churches for what they see as their disavowal of Christianity (Strommen & Schmiedel, 2020). They are “*Amtskirchen*” (official or establishment churches), and like all other institutions of establishment are, in the populist depiction, hierarchical and detached institutions that have lost touch with the true people. The PEGIDA founder Lutz Bachmann has made the link explicit, accusing churches of selling out their own culture like Judas. Church leaders are “fat princes of the church who ... have sold their faith ... for ... a few pieces of silver” (Bachmann, 2016).

The perception of religion as co-opted by the elite has also been seen in relation to the Brexit debate in the UK. The UK is a curious example when it comes to the analysis of populism. In parliamentary electoral terms (even in local government), the populist right has been largely unsuccessful, certainly by international comparisons. The UK Independence Party (UKIP), the Brexit Party and the BNP between them have only ever successfully won a single parliamentary seat in general elections. However, the impact and power of the populist right have nevertheless had a significant political impact, forcing a move to the right in the Conservative Party, a promised referendum on Brexit and then, of course, playing a major role in the delivery of a leave victory. Looking specifically at Christianity is more complex still. The BNP produced a Christian

manifesto and attempted to take on the mantle of the Christian right in the early 2000s, but with very limited success. (Spencer, 2019). UKIP, the most successful of the UK's populist right parties, has made some sporadic efforts at presenting itself as a party of Judaeo-Christian values, but rarely in a sustained or developed way (certainly by contrast to significant campaigns from the populist right in France, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria and Germany).

Brexit, however, does provide a partial exception to this rule in so far as there was a significant attempt to tie Brexit not only to a civilizational narrative of resisting migration (particularly Islam) but also that this process and freedom was in some way a direct re-enactment of the English Reformation. There were dozens of opinion pieces explicitly linking the Reformation to Brexit. It is notable too that nominal Christians (i.e., non-church-attending), particularly Anglicans, voted by a significant margin for Brexit, well above other groups and even accounting for other demographic features such as age (Woodhead & Smith, 2018). As with Christianity and voting trends elsewhere, actual church attendance made a significant difference (though even then, Anglicans voted by a majority to leave). Woodhead and Smith (2018) note that among these voters, the Church was valued as a critical symbolic aspect of English identity and did so despite the episcopal leadership of the Church of England being widely perceived as overwhelmingly supporting the remain campaign.

The stance of the Church of England came in for heavy criticism for precisely this reason among many Brexit supporters, to the point in which serving clergy have accused it of being co-opted and compromised by the liberal establishment (Norton, 2020). The counter-accusation comes from others that Brexit has been at least in part an exercise in Christianist civilizational conflict, with the Christianist right tapping into historic ideas of English exceptionalism as a nation set aside by God with notions of civilizational and racial superiority and little theological merit. So, for example, Anthony Reddie concludes, "The superiority of Britain is built on a bed-rock of Christian-inspired exceptionalism in which God has set apart the British, particularly the English, to occupy a special place in the economy of God's kingdom" (Reddie, 2019, p. 16).

Secularism

Drawing the two previous trends (belonging rather than believing and clashes with churches) together is a third key issue around secularism. This is the most obvious point of departure from either the American religious right or the European Christian nationalists. Those two movements are, to use the Davie model again, both belongers and believers. They are active Christians who desire a dilution of the barrier between Church and State and for whom secularism is a symptom of a wider Western problem. By contrast, the Christianists have a far more ambiguous relationship with secularism.

It is not quite so simple as to say that Christianists are consistently secular. Many of their campaigns mirror those other movements in seemingly diluting the line between Church and State. Prominent, for example, are campaigns in Italy, Germany and Southern France to have crucifixes displayed in all public buildings. These have been defining campaigns for *Lega*, RN and the *AfD* as well as the more populist element of the *Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern (CSU)* in Bavaria. Similarly, campaigns for nativity cribs in schools, for increased state funding for churches to prevent them from being turned into mosques and for official recognition of St Joan of Arc day as a national celebration have been prominent RN campaigns in France. This might seem like a straightforward undermining of the principles of secularism, but it is important to note that the Christianists do not seem to see it themselves that way. At the same time as having these campaigns, they also want to hold themselves as the champions of secularism. In the words of Marine Le Pen: "France is France. It has Christian roots. This is how it is. This is what makes its identity. It is *laïque*

and we are attached to this identity. We won't allow the transformation of this identity" (Roy, 2016, p. 91). There is no sense in this of a contradiction in the claim to be Christian and secular.

Nor is Le Pen a lone contradiction. Alain Finkelraut, a French Jewish philosopher and supporter of RN reiterates the same message in an interview quoted by the American writer Sasha Polakow-Suransky:

When I raise the issue of nativity scenes in public buildings, as clear a sign of a crumbling wall between church and state as I can imagine through American eyes, he is dismissive. Echoing Le Pen he argues, "There will be nativity scenes in town halls because France is an old Catholic country" and anyway, he insists, they are completely innocuous. "Catholicism is part of the cultural heritage of France". In his eyes it is not a state forcing religion down the throats of minority groups. "It is not at all the signal of a dominant religion that wants to impose its law".

(Polakow-Suransky, 2017, p. 133)

Part of the success story of RN in this space has been the ability to capture *laïcité*, previously a feature of the political left, with a strong anti-clerical and anti-establishment sentiment, and repurpose it as a feature of the political right and as a tradition to be upheld (Bergem & Bergem, 2019). This is a subversion of previous political norms into a populism that can borrow from the political left and right in a way that more traditional Christian right groups would not be able or willing to undertake.

Finkelraut is, therefore, idiosyncratic but correct. This is not an example of Christianity as a belief system imposing its values on others, but Christianity as a cultural marker of belonging being embedded as a dominant civilizational norm employed against unwelcome outsiders. On the one hand, Christianists call for nativity scenes and crucifixes and an undermining of secularist norms; on the other, they lead protests against the rights of religious groups to wear particular items of clothing or to open places of worship. In conflict with many of the established churches, they campaign for LGBT rights and abortion, and against religious opt-outs or recognized presence in the legislative sphere, on the basis that Western culture is not only Christian but simultaneously secular. There is no contradiction. First, because as believers but not believers, Christianists have nothing to fear from secularism undermining their own faith or its privileges. To quote Christian Joppke, "this is a light, essentially vestigial and symbolic privileging of Christianity" (Joppke, 2018: 236).

Second, there is no contradiction in that in some ways, this represents the ultimate victory of a secularist mindset that has reduced public Christianity to a purely cultural marker. It is in many ways the absolute inverse of the remarkable worldwide growth of Pentecostalism over the past century. If Pentecostalism is the ultimate example of Christianity as belief (as opposed to belonging), in which pure religion requires a personal conversion (you must be born again), cultural Christianity in the hands of the Christianists is the polar opposite. Christianity becomes a culture in which specific beliefs and actions are irrelevant, but also to which one cannot convert, but can only be either born into or only very gradually assimilated towards (Roy, 2008). Christianity is theology as personal identity, not faith. In that sense, it is a covenantal theology of a sort, in so far as it identifies the chosen people of God with a particular ethnic grouping (in a way in which Luke Bretherton believes to be innately heretical (Bretherton, 2019)), but without any expectations, behaviours or beliefs being expected of that people. "Christian" is an adjective to describe your culture, not a creed.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is no contradiction between the support for Christianity and secularism within Christianism because the target of the campaign is the same:

Islam and the exclusion of Muslims from Western public life, which can be established by either Christianity or secularism.

The relationship between Christianity and Islam

To repeat the quote from Brubaker above, “It’s [Christianism] a secularized Christianity as culture ... It’s a matter of belonging rather than believing ... We are Christians precisely because they are Muslims. Otherwise, we are not Christian in any substantive sense” (Green, 2017).

Islam and Christianity are innately tied. The root of Christianist support for secularism and, simultaneously, for a dilution of the distinction between Church and State in favour of publicly privileging Christianity, lies in a narrative of civilizational conflict. Campaigns in the name of secularism to ban particular outfits (the so-called Burkini on French beaches, for example), while also insisting on crucifixes and cribs in public buildings serves one and the same purpose, which is the exclusion of Islam from the Western public square. It is notable quite how significantly Islam features in Christianist narratives. The acronym PEGIDA is fascinating as a cultural marker. Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident, as it is usually rendered in English (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*), explicitly names Islam as the threat while positing a common European Western identity. Political scientists spent decades debating the attainability of a common European *demos* and collective identity but seem to have been blindsided by PEGIDA’s apparent ability to tap into a continental cultural identity.

The Huntington clash of civilizations thesis, so central to this view of Europe, was prophetic only truly in so far as the populist right has taken it on as a vision to be enacted, rather than a natural evolution. It has become a propulsion of what it sought to predict. The popularity of the thesis belies the fact that, overwhelmingly, civilization has proven to be a poor predictor of contemporary conflict, prejudice and discrimination (Fox, 2019). It has, however, fed a narrative that has allowed Islam to become increasing securitized and placed outside the standard democratic norms. It has been argued that in secular democracies, religious threats are particularly susceptible to becoming securitized (Lausten & Waeber, 2000). The lack of religious literacy, opposition to migration on the political right and the normative assumptions about the benefits of secularism on the liberal left combine to leave Islam as an easily ostracized other in a civilizationalist discourse. It is precisely this trend that Christianity has latched on to, using Huntington’s civilizational model combined with statist responses to external and internal threats with securitization (the so-called war on terror) to identify an acceptable enemy.

That is not to say that opposition to Islam came from nowhere or that it does not have deeper historic origins. Fear of the Turks and warfare on an eastern front that culminated in the besieging of Vienna in 1529 and again in 1683 by the Ottoman Empire played a significant role in constructing a common sense of identity among the Christian kingdoms of Europe. It is no coincidence that the *sala regina* hall in Rome, a room which has often been used for essential Vatican functions, depicts a large mural of the 1571 battle of Lepanto. This crucial victory over the Turks by a coalition created by a Pope serves as a model of Christian victory over Islamic outsiders. The national identity of more than one Eastern and Central European country is innately tied up in its status as a bastion of Christendom against an Islamic empire. The Spanish *Reconquista* is older but again provides a reminder that the idea of Islamic empires in conflict with Christian (particularly Catholic) ones is not without historic roots.

These historic roots cannot be denied, but neither can it be denied that the specific identification of Islam as a threat is more recent, and in particular since 9/11 and the war on terror. This is not simply a continuation of an ancient tension but more a contemporary trend that draws on a historic lineage. The better comparison for how Christianists view Islam is not the Ottoman

empire but with the far-right populism of a previous age and its attitude to anti-Semitism. So, for example, the far-right populism of Charles Maurras and Edmond Drumont in the late 19th century used Jews as a scapegoat for the failings of the French Third Republic, managing to combine in anti-Semitism a traditionalist Catholic suspicion of Jews as a threat to the Catholic traditions of France with a left-wing populist anti-capitalism. This “pragmatic antisemitism” (Bergem & Bergem, 2019) was largely opportunistic, though it tapped into ancient prejudices. We are witnessing a similar phenomenon today, in which pragmatic Islamophobia has become a useful tool for Christianists.

It should be noted that this pragmatic Islamophobia is effective precisely because it taps into genuinely widespread concerns. Polls in France in 2016 and 2018 revealed that around half of the French public believed Islam was incompatible with French values (Point, 2018). In the UK, only 28% were confident that Islam was compatible with British values in 2016; 43% believed it had a negative impact on the UK (ComRes, 2016). This context, along with media narratives and a persistent overestimation across the West of how large the Islamic population actually is has led to Muslims as a group becoming securitized to such an extent that even remarkably extreme positions have entered into Christianist proposals. In 2016, Geert Wilders’s *Partij voor de Vrijheid*, (Party for Freedom or PVV) party manifesto included explicit calls to ban the *Quran* and to close all mosques. They won 13% of the popular vote and 20 parliamentary seats.

Christianism in comparison to other right-wing Christian movements

The intent in this chapter has been to distil the distinctive nature of Christianism vis-à-vis other right-wing Christian political movements. The focus has, accordingly, been on the distinctiveness of Christianism rather than aspects on which it matches with the broader right-wing populist movement in Europe and North America. There are, of course, as Brubaker’s articles remind us, a number of other features of Christianism which are not as distinctive but fit into the mainstream of the contemporary populist right (Brubaker, 2017b). This would include, in general terms, a discourse that differentiates a pure people from the establishment elite and, by and large, an opposition to immigration and (in a European context) to the EU.

The extent of similarity and distinction from other right-wing Christian political movements is perhaps more obvious when put into direct comparison with other movements. Too often, these are conflated in a way that hinders good analysis. Accordingly, in order to better illustrate where Christianism sits as a genuinely novel development, what follows is a brief summary of how it compares to other right-wing Christian political movements, including, in a roughly chronological order, the late 19th- and early 20th-century Christian nationalists and fascists, Francoism, the mid-20th-century Christian democrats, the contemporary East European Christian populist right and the American religious right.

Historic Christian nationalism and fascism

Nineteenth-century European nationalism, in its broadest sense, drew deeply on religion as a basis for a shared civic identity (Bruce, 2003). This naturally varied in its specific context, with different expressions in Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox and Islamic nation states, but what was common was that this was a deliberate effort at forming a common identity or “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) imposed by an elite (Hastings, 1997). Immediately this throws up several distinctions from Christianism today. For one thing, Christianists are not attempting to forge a new nationhood or conception of the people, only to amplify an existing one. Second, the populist appeal of Christianism is defiantly anti-elite and anti-establishment, where the

19th-century model was neither. Finally, in most European contexts, this process of nation-building (indeed even the very concept of a nation state) was a partnership between the political elite and Church (wherein many states those were intersecting categories), while contemporary Christianity is often at odds with, or at least clearly distinct from, the Church.

The later 19th-century far-right nationalist movements provide a closer parallel, perhaps particularly in the *Action Française* movement and Charles Maurras. As explored above, there are parallels here in pragmatic prejudice (though directly at Jews rather than Muslims) and in civilizational discourse (though Maurras of course long pre-dated Huntington's thesis). Yet there are significant distinctions, perhaps the most significant of which is the relative downplaying of nationalism. A curiosity of the contemporary populist right is that it is less concerned with nationalism and the Maurras' demand to place allegiance to country above all other things. By contrast, Christianity is comparatively internationalist, well connected across Europe and North America and committed more to a conception of a Western, Christian civilization under threat (the *Abendland* in PEGIDA and AfD terminology), than to specific nations.

Moreover, and distinctive in this sense not only from *Action Française* but also Mussolini's fascism, is that the contemporary Christianist populists seem largely uninterested in the overthrow of the structures and forms of the liberal democratic state (Norris, 2019). Rather, parties like the AfD, RN, *Lega* and PVV are committed to parliamentary democracy. They seek to win by turning the norms of the liberal system against its own interests rather than replacing them. The Christianist approach, unlike the fascist, is not totalitarian but rather parasitic on liberalism and liberal democratic structures. It also inhabits a different vision of history. Where fascism understood itself as a utopian modernist vision for a new age, with a philosophical underpinning in Hegel and Heidegger (albeit harking back to more classical ancestry), Christianist and other contemporary populist right-wing movements are more innately conservative, looking to preserve a civilizational vision set in amber, rather than beckoning in something new.

Conservative authoritarianism

In respect of an attitude to history, there is perhaps a greater overlap between Christianity and the conservative authoritarianism of Francoism (and, to a lesser extent Salazar's Portugal). Francoism far more consciously and deliberately than fascism attempted to establish a social order based on a traditionalist Catholic vision of the state, crown and family. Though obviously not democratic, there is some similarity in trying to preserve a traditionalist system against outside interference (though Islam has replaced socialism) and in the insistence that national identity is defined by a religious culture. Where they differ, of course, is that Francoism genuinely believed that socially conservative Catholicism ought to define society in more than simply a loose cultural sense. Opposition to secularism and liberalism was aggressively enforced, whereas contemporary Christianity consciously promotes secularism and liberal views on LGBT and feminist issues where it suits an anti-Islamic narrative.

There is a difference too in the approach to populism. Francoism explicitly sought to retain existing elitist structures (Church and Crown) as being central to the national culture. Christianity looks to maintain democratic liberal structures but is based in large part on a narrative of disdain and opposition to the traditional elites and establishment that are deemed to have capitulated and abandoned the will of the people. Francoism had little interest in the people as a plebiscite holding the elite to account, whereas for the contemporary far right, this claim to being rooted in the will of the people is central.

Christian democracy

A separate, far more centrist vision of Christian right-wing politics is found in the Christian democracy parties, particularly of the late 1940s and 1950s. Some of these parties still exist, including the CSU and *Christlich Demokratische Union* (CDU) in Germany, the *Chrëschtlech Sozial Vollekspartei/Parti populaire chrétien-social* (CSV/PCS) in Luxembourg and (albeit after various mergers and changes) the Dutch *Christen-Democratisch Appèl* (CDA) party. Others, notably the French *Mouvement Républicain Populaire* (MRP) and the Italian *Democrazia Cristiana* (DC) party, that each played key roles in the establishment of the early European project have subsequently collapsed. The survivors have long been criticized for watering down the Christian-ness of their politics over subsequent decades and have been victims of political decline that cannot be entirely disentangled from Europe's increasing secularism (Müller, 2013), (Müller, 2014).

It is noticeable that the CSU in Bavaria, particularly in recent years under the leadership of Markus Söder, and, at a European level, Manfred Weber, have steered the party along much more Christianist lines than previously. Notably, for example, in 2018, Söder's government enacted the *Kreuzpflicht*, an obligation to display crosses in public buildings. In a campaign reminiscent of Christianist movements in other countries, Söder justified this in explicitly civilizational terms, stating that the crosses are not to be seen as Christian symbols but as symbols of Bavarian cultural identity (Agence France-Press, 2018). Critics suggest that moves such as these come more as a cynical heading off of threats from the AfD, but it marks a departure from the previous trajectory of Christian democrat parties.

Certainly, there has always been a cultural element to Christian democracy's approach to Christianity, but it had tended to be much less consciously exclusive. The Italian Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi, for example, was quoted as saying:

When I affirm that Christianity is at the origin of the European Civilisation, I do not intend to introduce any kind of exclusive confessional criterion into the evaluation of our history. I refer to the common European heritage, to that unitary morality that puts emphasis on the human being and his responsibility.

(Venneri & Ferrara, 2009, p. 118)

It has also tended to be more closely tied to the Church. The Christian democrat movements of the 1940s and 1950s were extensively networked across Europe and actively encouraged by the Vatican (Kaiser, 2007). Perhaps for this reason, they were also far more saturated in a theological ideology that borrowed extensively from Catholic social teaching (Kazenstein, 2006). Where Christianity is, as we have seen, a shallow theological enterprise, Christian democratic projects in the mid-20th century have been described as an act of theo-political imagination (Thomas, 2005).

The final difference is perhaps the most critical of all. Where Christianity is a form of populism with a demand to listen to the will of the people, Christian democracy was forged in opposition to the virulent nationalisms and fascism of the two world wars. Perhaps as a consequence, while they share some common social cures (a commitment to the welfare state, for example), they take completely opposite approaches to power. Christian democracy, notably through its support for the idea of subsidiarity and its internationalism, focuses on limiting the power of states and democratically elected governments. It was no accident that the early European project had no democratic structures. Today there is an obsession with the democratic deficit of the European Union: in its origins, this was a design feature designed to encourage consensus and limitations on absolute power from the ballot box.

The Christian right

The American Christian right emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s. As a political movement, it is necessary to distinguish it simply from socially conservative Christians (who exist in every society). The key to the Christian right is that it is a coherent and identifiable movement, with clear leaders and objectives and a particular association with the Republican party (Brown, 2002) (Williams, 2010). Leaders like the Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell and the televangelist Pat Robertson developed a significant network of supporters (e.g., the Christian Coalition, with 150,000 members in 210 chapters by 1992) who were mobilized behind candidates that supported their agenda.

This immediately highlights two differences with the Christianists (though in recent years in America, the distinction has broken down a little, as discussed below). First, the Christian right is genuine in its social conservatism. It campaigns actively against a perceived LGBT and anti-family agenda, for a reversal of the *Roe vs Wade* abortion case and for prayer in schools and more positively on a call to moral probity and family values. This contrasts significantly with Christianist support for liberal principles on LGBT issues, divorce and (in some cases) abortion. It is also seen in the relationships with churches. Christianist formal ties with churches tend to be limited or even hostile. The dominant personalities of the Christian right are closely associated with churches, particularly evangelical churches, and the grassroots support is often delivered through church networks.

Second, by nature of America's unusual two-party system, the Christian right has always been a pressure group within the Republican party. It has, on occasion, even attempted a takeover, as when Robertson ran against George H.W. Bush for the Republican nomination in 1988. It has never, however, made a concerted effort at subverting the establishment status quo by establishing a new party. The anti-establishment claim of the Christianists, meanwhile, has lent itself to seeking an identity as an outsider, a movement beyond the established power brokers.

The Donald Trump phenomenon provides a note of caution to this analysis. Much of the traditional Christian right, including Jerry Falwell's son Jerry Falwell Jr, his Liberty University project,¹ the televangelist Paula White, Franklin Graham (the son of the famous evangelist Billy Graham) and Ralph Reed, the president of the Faith and Freedom Coalition, have been closely associated with the Trump presidency. This can be partly ascribed to an alignment of convenience – Trump needed evangelical votes, they needed sympathetic voices on the Supreme Court. They share some opposition to “political correctness” and to a contemporary liberalism that is accused of undermining traditional values. Yet it also seems a curious match given the president's colourful private life and seeming ambivalence towards, and ignorance of, religion (Spencer, 2017).

Trump is rather more obviously aligned (to the extent that he has a consistent ideology) with a Christianist mindset. Light on piety himself, he does seem to believe in a civilizational culture – “America is a nation of believers”, as he said at his inauguration. More closely aligned still, though his stay as the White House chief strategist proved brief, was Steve Bannon. Bannon is a curious and eclectic figure, a Catholic not previously much connected with the Christian right but certainly closely associated with ethno-nationalist, anti-establishment and far-right groups across the US and Europe. In Trump, there is a confluence of these two disparate movements; the religious right model of using an establishment party as a vehicle to pursue a clear agenda on some socially conservative values and the Christianist populist anti-establishment (“drain the swamp”) narrative of civilization conflict. Trump is not quite either but is enough of a political magpie to have, consciously or unconsciously, latched on to the strategic values of both.

Contemporary Christian nationalists

Most commonly conflated with Christianists are populist right-wing Christian nationalists, particularly in Eastern and Central Europe. There is some justification for this, not least the fact that the populist European (and increasingly North American) right are increasingly well networked. In January 2020, for example, the National Conservatism conference was held in Rome, with speakers including the RN politician (and Le Pen's niece) Marion Maréchal, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Giorgia Meloni, the leader of the Brothers of Italy party – a successor to neo-fascist parties – Thierry Baudet, founder of the Eurosceptic populist *Forum voor Democratie* (FvD) (Forum for Democracy) party and parliamentarians and intellectual outriders from various other states including Poland, the UK, US and elsewhere. Some of these could certainly have been grouped together as Christianists, others as neo-fascists, ethno-nationalists or more traditional social conservative factions. This was unusually high profile but typical of an increasing level of co-ordination, shared rhetoric and campaigns across the populist right.

The Christian nationalists share with the Christianists a cultural sense of Europe as defined by Christian identity. In states like Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia, the national culture is deeply connected to resistance to Turkish (and Islamic) culture. In Poland, Catholicism has long had a particular place in the national culture and served as an anti-communist and anti-Russian badge of national pride. These give deep roots for a Christian cultural pride, as well as some latent anti-Islamic sentiment that links closely to the Christianist pragmatic Islamophobia.

However, there are also distinctions. The first is that, whereas the West European Christianists have encountered an immunization effect among church-going Christians, the same is not true in Eastern Europe. Church-attending Poles are consistently socially conservative, largely sceptical of liberal support for LGBT rights and abortion and supportive of nationalist rhetoric. It is a similar story in Hungary, and both the Polish PiS (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* or Law and Justice) and Hungarian Fidesz parties have been involved in a string of LGBT controversies. In August 2020, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán attempted to tap into this, declaring that “Western Europe had given up on ... a Christian Europe, and instead experiments with a godless cosmos, rainbow families, migration and open societies” (Komuves, 2020). The Christian nationalists are, accordingly, more consistently anti-liberal, social conservative and anti-secular and enjoy far more mainstream appeal among practising Christians than the West European Christianists. In the case of the Poles, they also enjoy closer relationships with significant factions of the Polish Catholic Church (this is less true in Hungary, though there are exceptions).

Conclusions

Ending on the note about the Christian nationalists of Eastern Europe is illustrative of the challenges in differentiating what is novel or distinct about Christianism. The anti-establishment, largely Eurosceptic and anti-migrant policies could, by and large, be identified with any populist right-wing politician or movement where there is a distinctiveness from other contemporary populist far-right groups in the use and understanding of Christianity. Within Christianism, Christianity is instrumentalized and conceived of primarily as a matter of cultural belonging. It is in that sense an almost entirely secularized vision of religion divorced from any particular beliefs. This explains in part how Christianist politicians often find themselves at odds with the churches, struggle to win over church-attending Christians and how they have tended to be able to simultaneously portray themselves as champions of liberal causes such as LGBT rights and secularism while also claiming to be guardians of Christian tradition. The appeal of Christianism is directed at a peculiarly Western demographic: the non-believer, disconnected from institutions

who wants to lay claim to a historic cultural identity against a perceived threat (migrants, or more specifically, Islam).

This demographic is a distinct and significant portion of the population. It is also quite unlike the population that the American religious right, Francoists or Christian democrats ever sought to appeal. Those movements operate (or operated) with a grassroots support base made up primarily of believing Christians and supported a set of moral claims which may be contestable within Christian theology but are, nevertheless, a recognizable development from theological premises or interests. The distinction is perhaps more muted in the contemporary Christian nationalists of Eastern and Central Europe, perhaps because of the level of cross-fertilization between the groups and shared interests in other areas (particularly Euroscepticism). Yet even here, there is a recognizably different focus. The Christian nationalists have an internal consistency in the claim to represent traditional Christian values. Though they seek to appeal to the nominal Christian with a sense of national or cultural attachment to Christianity, they also draw strong support from active Christians. There is no pretence among the Christian nationalists that Christianity can be reduced to a purely cultural entity or that secularism, liberalism and LGBT rights can happily co-exist with such a particular vision of traditional Catholicism. This pretence, or paradoxical claim to traditional Christian values and a cherry-picking of secular liberalism, is the curious and unique contribution of Christianity to contemporary populism.

Note

- 1 At the time of writing (September 2020), Jerry Falwell Jr was subject to a developing scandal and had resigned from Liberty University. To what extent he would continue to be a leading figure in the movement was at that stage unknown.

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