



The rise of Christian populism



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The democratic deficit

Lamenting the state of our democracy – indeed of Western liberal democracies in general – has become such a popular dinner party trope that it is almost printed on the menu now. There is good reason for this wailing and gnashing of teeth. Until quite recently, the global triumph of democracy seemed assured. In 1900, there were no fully-fledged democracies (by today's understanding) anywhere. By 1950, 28% of regimes were fully democratic. By the millennium, nearly two in three regimes worldwide were democratic.

The tide then appeared to turn, albeit slowly. A decade into this century, the Economist Intelligence Unit published its regular Democracy Index, under the title 'Democracy in retreat', remarking that 'the decades-long global trend in democratisation had previously come to a halt in what Larry Diamond called a "democratic recession". Now democracy is in retreat.' Fewer countries were making the transition to stable political accountability; more were stuck with dictatorship or worse.

No less alarming were the cluster of facts that showed how, even in those countries where democracy was apparently triumphant, its victory appeared to be hollow. Electoral turnout in Western Europe slid, from an average, two generations ago, of over 80% to nearer 70% today, and lower still in the USA. The British got very excited by the voter turnout in 2017, although it remained the fifth successive General Election with a sub-70% turnout, lower than every post-war 20th century election.

Turnout for transnational or local elections is much lower still. Distrust of elected politicians and cynicism towards democratic politics have rarely been higher. Mainstream political parties have nearly died, the Labour Party under Corbyn being the exception that proves the rule. We honour the processes and vehicles of mainstream democracy more in the breach than in our observance.¹

Populism

In the absence or, at least, decline in mainstream democratic, party politics, we have seen the rapid rise in populism. It is dangerously easy to get pious about 'populism' and to complain about it in a way that (inadvertently) explains why people turn to the populist option in the first place. This is the point of view that sees people's anxiety over immigration as nothing but covert racism; their concerns about multiculturalism as little more than xenophobia and small-mindedness; and their economic fears as simply a failure to understand that globalisation is actually good for everyone in the long run. 'Populism' can sometimes sound like the name that disconcerted liberals give to the kind of politics in which ordinary people don't do what liberals tell them.

In reality, populism, like all such words, is capacious. As *The Economist* remarked last year, towards the end of the year in which the phenomenon came of age, as a 'populist' Presidential candidate, Donald Trump wanted to deport undocumented migrants, whereas the populist Spanish party Podemos wanted to give them voting rights. Bolivia's populist

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1. For these figures and more reflection on the decay of democracy in Western democracies, see Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2003).
2. What is populism? *The Economist*, 19 December 2016; <http://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2016/12/economist-explains-18>
3. Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell and Olivier Roy (eds.), *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion* (London: Hurst, 2016).
4. Roy et al., *Saving the People*, p. 27.
5. Roy et al., *Saving the People*, p. 200.

president, Evo Morales, expanded indigenous farmers' rights to grow coca, whilst the Philippines' populist president, Rodrigo Duterte, ordered police to execute drug dealers. 'Populists might be militarists, pacifists, admirers of Che Guevara or of Ayn Rand; they may be tree-hugging pipeline opponents or drill-baby-drill climate change deniers.'² Politically, there is very little that unites populism.

Any definition is, therefore, problematic but I would argue that the phenomenon has three notable, and related, characteristics. One is an adherence to 'the people', with the emphasis on the definite article: the people. Populism favours rhetoric and policies that ignore or reject the plural realities of most societies, and instead locates political legitimacy in the idea of a coherent, cohesive *demos*.

The second characteristic is linked to the first; just as populism inclines away from the messy realities of pluralism towards the comforting simplicity of 'the people', so it inclines away from messy compromises of representational democracy towards simple, indeed simplistic, solutions. Elites are censured (although not always without reason), 'experts' denounced and 'radical' solutions proposed.

The third characteristic is linked to the first two: the rise of identity politics. 'Rise' is actually the wrong term here. Identity politics has flourished for decades, albeit usually directed to minorities. Multiculturalism, a common bogeyman for populists, thrived on recognising, fostering, protecting and promoting identities. Populism does the same only for the majority. In this sense, populists lie in the bed that the liberals they loathe have made for them.

This combination of simplicity, majoritarianism and identity politics is a powerful one and, in particular, one to which Christians should pay careful attention because Christianity has become closely tied up with it.

Christian populism

Until recently, scant attention had been paid to the role of Christianity in Western populist movements. This has, in part, been addressed by a fine collection of essays published by Hurst last year.³

In Italy, Poland, Switzerland, Hungary, Austria, and to a lesser or different extent Russia, Germany, the UK, and the Scandinavian countries, populist parties have drawn on Christian language, Christian imagery and – superficially – Christian concerns. A handful of examples illustrate this. For over a decade now, Italy's Lega Nord ('Northern League') has repeatedly emphasised the defence of 'the Christian people', and focussed on Christian symbols in public and state spaces, seeking to protect crucifixes from the encroachment of human rights, multiculturalism and Muslims.⁴ The Austrian Freedom Party has explicitly identified Christianity as the 'spiritual foundation of Europe', spoken out against hedonistic consumption and

aggressive capitalism, and launched campaigns in favour of church bells over against the Islamic Muezzin. The Swiss People's Party has campaigned vigorously against new mosques and minarets. In Hungary, Viktor Orban's governing Fidesz party and, even more so the far right Jobbik party, have repeatedly placed stress on the need to protect

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Christendom against Muslims, and the evils of liberalism and multiculturalism that make straight the path for them.

For these politicians, parties and, occasionally, governments, Christianity is an immensely powerful tool. The ways in which they use it have differed subtly according to cultural context. Most talk about Europe's 'Christian heritage'. Many talk about their 'Christian roots', their 'Christian values', 'Christian principles', 'Christian people' or 'Christian identity'. Some, particularly in places like Hungary that are conscious of having been on the edge of it, talk about 'Christendom', although Hungarian populism mixes its Christianity with certain vaguely pagan elements. All of them attack the things that apparently undermine these – capitalism occasionally, liberalism often, multiculturalism usually, Islam always.

It is important to emphasise that this isn't a necessary connection: not all populist parties and politicians are 'Christian' or use Christian language and imagery. France's Front National has an ultra-conservative Catholic wing, and likes to dwell on Joan of Arc and her attendant Christian symbolism as a source of national identity. However, the party has never made a specific push for Christian values, preferring instead to use the nation's *laïcité* as its rallying cry. Secularism, rather than Christianity, is used to define (and exclude) the other. Accordingly, by the reckoning of a 2010 poll in France, 'only 5 per cent of French Evangelicals vote for the Front National, as opposed to 38 per cent of traditional Lutherans in Alsace'.⁵ It's a similar story in the Netherlands where neither Pim Fortuyn List nor Geert Wilders' Freedom Party, the significant populist parties of recent years, have made any explicit appeal to Christian values or play for Christian votes. In these countries, there is only a relatively thin Christian culture for populist politicians to weaponise; in its stead, national traditions of secularism and liberalism do the populist heavy lifting.

Christian populism in the UK

The UK cuts a curious figure amidst these countries. While it has many of the ingredients for the kind of Christian populism seen on the continent, the Christian populist movement in the

UK has been anaemic. By far the most successful populist party – although many of its supporters would deny it was populist at all – UKIP has been largely disinterested in playing the Christian card.

Before UKIP, the British National Party (BNP), with neo-fascist origins and barely-concealed racism, was much more obviously populist in the terms used above. The BNP's 'the people' were white and indigenous; its solutions based on 'voluntary' repatriation of immigrants and ethnic minorities. The BNP too made one or two half-hearted attempts to hitch their political wagon to the Christian horse. In 2006, the party called for the re-introduction of morning school assemblies based on Christian worship and few years later, in response to a spat with the Church of England, to which we will return, it ran a poster, somewhat improbably quoting Jesus from John's Gospel: 'if they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.' Generally speaking, however, the BNP's Christianity was thin and unpersuasive.

The only British populist party that has made a serious play – albeit an even less successful one – for the 'Christian values' rhetoric so common on continental Europe is the English Defence League (EDL), an overtly-racist party that moved into territory vacated by the implosion of the BNP. The EDL was (and is) aggressively anti-Muslim and uses Christian language, signs and phrases to make its point. Its logo is a cross, of a St George's variety, and its motto is 'In hoc signo vinces', translated as 'in this sign you will conquer', the message written in the sky for the emperor Constantine before his epochal battle at Milvian Bridge, which was the first step towards the Christianisation of the Empire and of Europe.

The EDL's efforts at harnessing Christianity for its aggressively exclusionary and prejudicial politics delivered precious little success however and the party marks the most obviously failed attempt at a British version of Christian populism. The reason for this failure, and similarly for the BNPs, helps point towards the proper Christian response to this shift in democratic politics.

Theology and populism

One oft-suggested reason why the EDL's and BNP's attempt at Christian populism failed is that there simply isn't the Christian constituency to enable it to succeed. This, however, is unconvincing as it makes the mistake of assuming that populism draws on *churchgoing* Christian support as opposed to *cultural* Christian support. Indeed, if the example of the French polling data cited above can be trusted, serious churchgoing may be a hindrance.

Rather, the failure of the EDL's and the BNP's Christian landgrab was due in significant measure to the concerted ecclesiastical response. In the time of the latter's heyday, broadly the first decade of the century, the Church of England, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, the Methodist

Church, the ecumenical instrument Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, other formal Christian organisations, and many more local ones, spoke out vigorously against the BNP's politics. After the 2008 London Assembly election, in which the BNP polled over 5% of votes thereby winning a seat on the Assembly, it was leaked that several Christian ministers were party members. In response, the Church of England's General Synod voted overwhelmingly in favour of banning Anglican clergy from belonging to the party – provoking the BNP's Jesus poster mentioned above.

This ecclesiastical reaction may have been notable for its concerted focus – and one must recall that, on the populist spectrum, the BNP clearly stood at the uglier, more obviously racist end – but it was not unique. Indeed, one of the features of European politics over the last decade or so has been the way in which senior church figures have stood out against Christian populism. European churches have usually and often vigorously rejected populists' overtures, and often proved the most prominent critics of their calls to, for example, ban burqas, minarets or mosques, or remove immigrants and asylum seekers.

Perhaps Christian populism's biggest problem is Pope Francis himself. Francis chose Lampedusa, the Italian island inundated with refugees, for his first trip outside of Rome. He very publicly met with refugees housed in Lesbos. He has repeatedly spoken of the Christian duties of hospitality to the poor and needy, and not just 'our' poor and needy. He has attacked the excesses of capitalism with a demotic vigour unheard from his two immediate predecessors (though his theological critique is not as different from them as many imagine). His first encyclical was about the environment. He made some largely undisguised criticisms of Donald Trump and had a transparently terse meeting with him in May 2017. Even if he has been vocal about Europe's decline and prepared to associate it with its loss of spiritual identity, in a way that Pope Benedict XVI repeatedly did, Francis has not been the kind of 'Christian Europe' message that Christian populists have liked hearing. Once again, it has been Christians who have spoken out against Christian populism.

We need to be careful here and not sugar the pill. By no means all church leaders have denounced Christian populism. Cardinal Peter Erdo, for example, head of the Hungarian Roman Catholic Church, said that providing shelter for refugees would constitute an act of people smuggling. The Russian Orthodox Church has been central to Putin's mission of a reinvigorated Russian nation and culture. Evangelicals in the USA rallied behind Donald Trump even more than they did George W Bush. In short, it has certainly not been the case that all church leaders or congregations have stood out again all populist forms of Christian appropriation. Nevertheless, the fact that, and the way in which, so

many have points towards the critical tension that lies at the heart of Christian populism.

Theology or identity

In their analysis of (primarily European) Christian populism, Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy repeatedly stress a number of related points.

The first is that, ironically (or perhaps not), 'most populists tend to be secular themselves'. Christian populist politicians may well go to church – indeed, it is hard to play the Christian populist card without being seen in church. But that does not mean they have a history of churchgoing, let alone any deep spiritual, still less theological, attachment to Christianity.

Secondly, Christian populist politicians 'do not consider Christianity as a faith, but rather as an identity'. This is centrally important. Such politicians are profoundly interested in Christian 'values' but those values tend to be wholly coterminous with the ethno-cultural-national ones of the nation or 'the people' in question. This is Christianity that baptises existing national values and commitments, rather than challenges them; Christianity as the priest who blesses the king, rather than the prophet who challenges him. Accordingly, the level of intellectual engagement with the content of Christian faith is usually woefully thin. There is, in short, precious little theology done.

Third, the use of Christianity by populists is almost always exclusionary. Christian imagery and commitments are deployed primarily to show who is out and why, the reason being some variation of the attachment they have (or don't have) to 'our' Christian culture. Inevitably, this is focused primarily on immigrants and Muslims (and especially Muslim immigrants), though it can also be used to attack those elites responsible for the liberal and multicultural policies that allow immigrants and Muslims in in the first place.

Fourth, they (often) 'place Christendom above Christianity', or, put another way they favour material and geographic manifestations of the faith over and above personal or relational ones. Christianity is drained of personal, spiritual content and understood, instead, primarily in territorial and political terms.

Finally, the cross – which remains a popular symbol among Christian populists – is largely 'emptied' of its content. Christian populists try to ignore the 'theological dogma' of the cross and instead prefer to treat it as a comfortable symbol of national or cultural identity – a kind of spiritual flag – rather than a painful and challenging symbol of sacrifice and reconciliation.

In one sense all of these points, except perhaps the first, are variations of one key problem. Christian populism pits the cause of Christian identity over and against the cause of Christian theology. The

pseudo-Christian badge that stands as a cipher for my culture and nation takes precedence over its actual theological content. A Christian nation becomes a nation full of people who call themselves Christians rather than one full of people who live like Christians. Throughout, the focus is on me and others like me, rather than the 'Other'.

The division between identity and theology is not, of course, a neat and clean one. Most Christians who have some idea of what Christianity is about – let's call them 'theologically literate' for want of a better phrase – are also highly likely to identify with the Christian faith. The same does not necessarily apply vice versa, however. There are many people who adhere to Christian identity who know or care little about the content of Christianity.

This kind of 'nominalism' is a long-standing phenomenon, even if it has become rather more widespread over recently years to the point of being the norm in many European countries. That recognised, its recent politicisation is something new. Here we see an adherence to Christianity shorn of the content that makes the faith – or should make it – such a disconcerting presence in your life, and then weaponised. Christian identity minus Christian theology allows you to speak of Christian people or Christian nation without properly scrutinising either of those terms. It allows you to speak of Christian values without realising how similar they are to your natural or national values. It allows you to say 'no' to the other, without thinking through how you might also say 'yes'. Ultimately, it turns Christianity into a tool for political ends, rather than politics a tool for Christian ends.

Conclusion

Democracies are made up of people, and people are naturally 'theological' – they are, in Christian Smith's memorable formulation, 'moral, believing animals'. They ask profound questions about their identity, their purpose, their destiny. They are ethically conscious; they want to live good lives. They belong, they are communal, group-based, tribal.

These are the raw ingredients for some serious theological reflection, which can be done well or badly. When populist politics hijacks Christianity, ejecting theology and replacing content in the process, Christians cannot remain silent. Secularists may seize on this trend and use it to further their cause of removing religion from the public square. But that would, in reality, be simply to exacerbate the problem. A different approach is needed. It is sometimes said that the best antidote to this bad religion is not no religion, but good religion. So it is with populism: the best defence against superficial, content-lite, Christian *identity* politics, is theologically informed, content-heavy, Christian *belief* politics.