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Exploring Religions in Relation to Populism: A Tour around the World

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Abstract: This paper explores the emerging scholarship investigating the relationship between religion(s) and populism. It systematically reviews the various aspects of the phenomenon going beyond the Western world and discusses how religion and populism interact in various contexts around the globe. It looks at Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity and how in different regions and cultural contexts, they merge with populism and surface as the bases of populist appeals in the 21st century. In doing so, this paper contends that there is a scarcity of literature on this topic particularly in the non-Western and Judeo-Christian context. The paper concludes with recommendations on various gaps in the field of study of religious populism.

Keywords: populism; religion; religious populism; global populism



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1. Understanding Populism

In the second decade of the 21st century, populism has emerged as a significant electoral force across the world. The election of Donald Trump as US President and the successful Brexit referendum in 2016 were populist revolts that appealed to similar constituencies and which vastly increased scholarly attention on the phenomena of populism.

As populism has spread across a number of very different societies, taking the form of a global trend (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013), we observe it manifesting in different forms including right-wing, left-wing, nativist (Bergmann 2020), nationalist or civilizationist populism (Brubaker 2017). A scholarly consensus has largely come to agree that “populism is confrontational, chameleonic, culture-bound and context-dependent” (Arter 2011, p. 490). At the same time, there is a clear recognition that populism cannot be described as a “thick” (“thick” refers to a solid ideology with a proper worldview such as socialism or liberalism) ideology (that it is not analogous to socialism or liberalism) because it cannot stand on its own, but must be attached to a wider left-wing, right-wing, or eclectic political/social programme (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). However, there is no clear evidence that populism, while it takes on a vertical approach to absorb or attach itself to various ideologies, is simply a form of extremism or authoritarianism. Whereas in the past, populism was endemic to Latin America, today populism impacts highly democratized countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, and regions such as Western Europe (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2007). Notwithstanding its competing definitions and leaving its ontological nature to the discussion on the extant literature, we contend that populism is about constructions (construction, de-construction and re-construction) of “the people(s)”, and the mobilization of these constructions in an antagonistic fashion by populists. This construction of “the people,” we contend, is “the main task” of populists (Laclau 2006; Wojczewski 2020; Katsambekis 2020).

In this paper, we probe the relationship between populism and religion, and also examine how populism is practiced in different religious contexts. In line with this objective,

the paper proceeds as follows: we first set out and conceptualise the relationship between religion and populism. Then, we focus on five religions and examine their relationship with populism. Due to constraints on length, we could only examine the well-known global religions. Therefore, alongside the three monotheistic religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism, we also unpack Buddhism's and Hinduism's relations with populism. In analysing each one, we selected a number of different countries and political settings in which these respective religions dominate the social and political spheres. For example, when examining the relationship between Hinduism and populism, we chose to study its most politically consequential manifestation: the rise of Hindu Nationalism in India, especially in the form of the ruling Narendra Modi-led BJP, believing that this is the best method of understanding how Hinduism and populism interact. While choosing political settings for other religions, we follow the same logic, which allows us to take tour around the world and observe religious populism as it is practiced in a number of diverse political and social contexts.

2. Populism

The conceptualization of populism is highly contested. Perhaps the largest body of scholars argue that populism is a divisive set of ideas or ideology that considers society ultimately separated into two hegemonic and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite" (Mudde 2004, p. 543), and argues that politics should serve to the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, p. 151). In this way, populism may be understood as being fundamentally critical of representative democracy, but not antidemocratic. (Taggart 2004). According to this conception of populism as a set of ideas or ideology, populism is so "thin" that it requires an established host ideology to function (De la Torre 2017, p. 7). This is the approach we take in this paper. However, alongside these ideational approaches, some other accounts treat populism as "a Manichean discourse that divides politics and society as the struggle between two irreconcilable and antagonistic camps: the people and the oligarchy or the power block" (De la Torre 2017, p. 195), or a well-devised strategy used to win the rewards of power via popular support (Barr 2009). Another group of scholars conceives of populism as no more than a type of political performance (Moffitt 2017). Yet, for seminal scholar of populism Ernesto Laclau, populism is natural to politics, and a discourse that brings into existence "the people". (Laclau 2005, p. 154). According to Moffitt (2016, p. 23), Laclau argues that "when a demand is un-satisfied within any system, and then comes into contact with other unsatisfied demands, they can form an equivaential chain with one another, as they share the common antagonism/enemy of the system".

Beyond these definitional issues, Taguieff (1995, pp. 32–35) observes two broad dimensions of populism: vertical and horizontal. In its vertical dimension, populism divides top from bottom, or "the people" from "the elite". The horizontal dimension divides society between "the people" who belong and the "others" who do not belong—the unwanted peoples, the traitors, and other excluded peoples. At times, populists introduce another aspect to populism: civilizationalism. As we shall see, this is especially common among religious and identitarian populist movements. Brubaker, for example, observes how populists in North-Western Europe have adopted civilizationalism, in which peoples and nations are classified according to the religious civilization to which they are alleged to belong. Populist leaders such as Geert Wilders thus claim that Europe is the culmination of two-thousand years of Judeo-Christian and Humanist culture, and that it faces an existential threat from Muslims and Islamic Civilization. This civilizational aspect is thus particularly important in the populist construction of "the people" and designation of enemies. Moreover, the vertical and horizontal dimensions of populism may be couched within a deeper civilization frame, allowing for elites and others to be portrayed as threatening to "the people" and their civilization.

Civilizationist populism puts less emphasis on national differences and more on civilizational distinctions, especially religions and their cultural legacies (Brubaker 2017,

p. 1211). In this environment, religion emerges as a political identity defined by its “other”. Thus, through the lens of civilizational populism, Brubaker argues, right-wing populists in Europe converged towards each other due to their anxious preoccupation with an imagined civilizational threat from Islam. This anxious “preoccupation with Islam has given rise to an identitarian “Christianism”, a secularist posture, a philosemitic stance, and an ostensibly liberal defence of gender equality, gay rights, and freedom of speech” (Brubaker 2017, p. 1193). Thus, while civilizationism can still be “understood as a form of nationalism, the boundaries of belonging and the semantics of self and other are reconceptualized in civilizational terms, then one can speak of an alternative to nationalism” (Brubaker 2017, p. 1211). In this civilizationalist discourse, the imagined community or nostalgic utopian home is “located at a different level of cultural and political space than national discourse” (Brubaker 2017, p. 1211). Civilizationism is an alternative principle of vision and division of the world, but it does not supersede nationalism; rather, it combines their forces (Brubaker 2017, p. 1211). Civilizationism (or civilizationist rhetoric) in the hands of populist actors serves as a highly effective emotional instrument of division and galvanizer of popular support. Drawing on this discussion, we argue that Islamist populism is the embodiment of a civilizational aspect of populism within Muslim societies, and that its survival and maintenance are highly dependent on continued antagonism between Islam and its other, the Judeo-Christian West.

3. Religion and Populism

Religion has re-emerged over the past three decades, to the surprise of many scholars, as a key factor in domestic and international politics (Grzymala-Busse 2012). The growing prominence of religion in politics is evident in populist rhetoric dominating political life across the world. Thus, to reveal the very nature of the relationship between religion and politics in the 21st century, we require further research on the phenomenon through the lenses of populism. Religion—in its various forms—is providing fertile ground not only in constructing a receptive audience—“the pure people” of populists—but also provides relevant and highly valuable materials which help populists create “us” versus “them” dichotomies, and in perpetuating these divisive binaries (Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017; Peker 2019; Roy 2016; Zúquete 2017; Hadiz 2018; Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018).

Populism, by its very nature, attaches itself to “thick” ideologies. In this regard, particularly for right-wing populism, religion(s) emerges as an indispensable host, which is clear in right-wing populism’s approach to the issue of gender (Dietze and Roth 2020). This attaching of populism to religion helps populists turn religion into a tool of power consolidation within societies in which religion already plays an important social role. In relation to this, Case’s analysis of cooperation between former US President Donald Trump and some leading religious figures from the gender perspective is quite illustrative in this sense (Case 2019). Beyond this, populism’s Manichean character, or its division of the world into categories of “good” and “evil”, mimics fundamentalist religion. Manichean here refers to the ancient religion known as Manichaeism and named after its founder, the prophet Mani, which is “traditionally characterized as having taught an elaborate myth describing a cosmic war between two co-eternal powers of light and darkness” (Baker-Brian 2011, p. 1). While the actual religion cannot be reduced to this myth, the term “Manichean” is often used to describe religious and secular ideologies which describe the world in simple, dualistic terms, especially in terms of a battle between good and evil, or us vs. them (Baker-Brian 2011, p. 1).

Yet, populism, even when not attached to a religion, may act as a kind of secular faith insofar as it sacralises “the people”, raising them above the “evil” and corrupt elites and others populists charge with being “enemies of the people”. A populist leader may themselves even be identified or portray themselves as a messianic figure or saviour. Equally, populism may attach itself merely to one aspect of religion: religious identity. Populism may therefore become identitarian, and place people in categories of “good” and “evil” based on their religious identification (as opposed to their actual religious beliefs and

practices). Religious identity can be useful, as we shall see, even to secular populists because stripped of all spiritual and ethical teachings, religion retains the power to define peoples, cultures, values, and—important to identitarian populists—civilizations. Additionally, these things, much more than “faith” and morals, are important to populist politicians.

In line with the trend towards more scholarly examination of religion and politics, scholars have begun to examine the relationship between religion and populism, having recognized the latter to be a growing phenomenon increasingly important in the Americas and Europe, and one perhaps with links to religion in its different forms. However, further research is required to refine and explicate the relationship between populism and religion, especially beyond the religion and populist radical right parties of Western Europe, which have so far been the main objects of study (Mudde 2007, p. 296). Indeed, many of these works are focused on Europe and on the “identitarian” aspect of religion in right-wing populist movements (Mudde 2007, p. 296; Roy 2016; Ozzano and Bolzonar 2020). The lack of scholarship on non-Western religious populism is unfortunate and almost inexplicable when we consider how widespread the phenomenon has become. For example, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindutva narrative (Andr et al. 2020; Gandesha 2020), Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan’s Riyasat-e-Medina (Hassan 2020; Latif 2018), and Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan’s Islamist rhetoric (Yavuz and Öztürk 2019; Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018) and style are all types of religion-based populist appeals. This is in contrast to Western Europe, where the majority of right-wing populist movements use mere religious identity, rather than religious belief and practice, as an identifier of “the pure people” (Marzouki and McDonnell 2016, p. 2). It is also surprising that more scholars have failed to notice how populism acts as a surrogate religion, sacralising “the people” and making holy the people’s will, and promising “salvation” to a nation if they elect a particular populist leader or party into government (Zúquete 2017; DeHanas and Shterin 2018).

Table 1 below summarises how populism borrow from religion.

Table 1. Populism borrowing from religion.

	Populism	Religion
Categorization of society	“the people” versus “the elite”	Sacred and profane, religious adherents and non-adherents; and in types of fundamentalist religion, good versus evil.
Psychosocial support for followers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heaven on earth • Promise of escape from current troubles and safeguard from catastrophe 	Paradise in afterlife—day of judgement, afterlife, nirvana
Leadership	Leaders mimic religious ideals in their actions such as body language, speech, clothing, etc., to become “sacred” or representatives of that divine	Sacred position given to Prophets or Messengers
Ideology	Identity-based politics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religious values are enshrined in the political ideology and it seeks to create a “heaven on Earth” for followers • Secularized values are sacred and above all—thus, creating that “in” and “out group” distinction for minority or migrants 	Faith-based identity

4. Islam and Populism

The relationship between populism and religion, and the manner in which populists in Muslim-majority electoral democracies harness religion to help construct and mobilize “the people”, is an emerging phenomenon beginning to draw scholarly attention (Marzouki and McDonnell 2016). The Islam and populism nexus is closely related to the political form of

Islam known as Islamism. Islamism, as Tugal contends, combines “material and cultural understandings of religion” and is “a multivalent religio-moral populism—a potentially explosive articulation of different class interests and religious cravings” (Tugal 2002, p. 86). Islamism is also deeply wedded to Islamic ideas of justice, particularly economic justice, and for that reason, can easily be attached to populism, which is itself based on notions of elites acting unjustly towards “the people”. Islamist populists in Turkey, and in other Muslim countries such as Pakistan and Indonesia, present Islam as the solution to material inequalities, setting them within a typically populist “us vs. them” frame (Hassan 2020; Hadiz 2018). For example, Turkish Islamists “very frequently point out the imbalances of wealth” in Turkey, and ascribe them to Turkey’s “alienation from Islam” in the post-Ottoman period (Tugal 2002, p. 103). From this point of view, it would not be wrong to generalize that Islamist movements, relying on antagonistic binaries, are inherently populist.

In Muslim-majority geographies, populism first manifested in Pan-Islamist anti-colonialist political movements such as the Khilafat (Caliphate) Movement (1919–1924). Khilafat was rooted in uniting (which also means constructing) and mobilizing Muslims of India to rally support for the Ottoman Empire and its ruler in the aftermath of the allies’ victory in the First World War (Pernau-Reifeld 1999) in an attempt to preserve the “sacred” leadership of the Caliphate, which European forces had resolved to dismantle (Pernau-Reifeld 1999; Trivedi 1981, pp. 458–67).

In the 1950s and 1960s, Gamal Abdel Nasser blended religious populism with nationalism and authoritarianism to shape of modern-day Egypt, and also united the fragmented Arab states in the aftermath of the Second World War (Lahouari and Roberts 2017, p. 210; Crabbs 1975). Later, the rise of public religions the 1980s and 1990s saw the growth of Islamic populism across a variety of nations (Casanova 1994), especially in post-revolutionary Iran (Zúquete 2017, p. 449; Dorraj 2014, pp. 134–40). Equally, the Islamism associated with al Qaeda and the so-called “Global Jihad” may have populist elements, insofar as it frames Muslims as an ummah (or people) oppressed by non-Muslims, most often by secular “elites” (Zúquete 2017, p. 449).

Islamic populist framing may take on nationalist forms, or civilizationalist forms, though often these are found in combination. For example, in Indonesia, primarily nationalist right-wing Islamic populism has a significant presence in public life through Islamist movements that blend civilization-based rhetoric and nationalism. These Islamists rarely attempt to refashion Indonesian into a Sharia-based state (Hadiz 2018, p. 566). Rather, they have embraced, at times, neoliberal economics (Hadiz 2018, p. 570), and also a kind of illiberal democratic politics similar to the populism of Europe and the Americas, though filtered through an Islamic and Indonesian lens (Hadiz 2018, p. 568). Yet, “reinforcement of cultural idioms associated with Islam is required for the mobilisation of public support in contests over power and resources based on an ummah-based political identity” (Hadiz 2018, p. 567). Indonesian populists, therefore, borrow from the call for justice—particularly economic justice—inherent in Islam but frame it in populist terms, and claim that the Indonesian ummah is oppressed by a wealthy Chinese elite minority (Hadiz 2018, pp. 571–72). In this way, and using Islamic language of justice and fairness, Indonesian populist movements such as the National Movement to Safeguard the MUI Fatwa (GNPF-MUI) have portrayed Chinese non-Muslims such as former Governor of Jakarta Ahok as not being part of “the people” or ummah, but rather actively working against their interests (Hadiz 2018, p. 576; Peterson 2020). In the case of the GNPF-MUI, the group sprang from a number of Islamic organizations that held mass rallies in order to support the MUI, or Indonesian Ulama Council, which had ruled that Ahok had blasphemed against Islam and ought to be punished by Indonesian authorities (Peterson 2020, pp. 4–5). The mass rallies were successful; Ahok found himself on trial and later convicted of blasphemy (Peterson 2020, p. 1). That the GNPF-MUI were not a political party per se but rather a large group that came together to hold mass rallies, suggests that while populist parties in Indonesia have not attained much electoral success, they remain politically important. Mietzner, for example, argues

that the growth of Islamic populism is slowly “deconsolidating” Indonesian democracy, and turning Indonesian away from liberal pluralism altogether (Mietzner 2018).

Electorally successful Islamist populism operates in Egypt, Turkey, and Tunisia (Hadiz 2018, p. 567). In these majority Muslim nations “cultural idioms associated with Islam are required . . . for the mobilisation of a distinctly ummah-based political identity in contests over power and resources in the present democratic period” (Hadiz 2018, p. 567). The case of Turkey under AKP rule is especially salient in this regard (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018). Under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s rule, the AKP has replaced Kemalist secularism with a new programme, incorporating “Islamism, nationalism, and populism” and substantially blurring the boundaries between each (Taş 2020, p. 2). This new populist programme involved Islamist elements such as Ottomanist nostalgia, Islamist conservatism, and growing Islamist generations (Yilmaz 2018, p. 54; Yilmaz 2021a). While the AKP maintained a populist conception of society in which Erdoğan was presented as “the voice of deprived ‘real people’ and the champion of their interest against old ‘elites’”, the party also pursued an Islamist, anti-secular project involving mandatory religious education of the young, and a “post-Kemalist neo-Ottomanist outlook in identity politics” that radically altered Turkey’s sense of itself and elements of its foreign policy (Yilmaz 2018, pp. 54–55; Yilmaz et al. 2020). Inside the populist “Muslim nationalism” of the AKP is an imagined Turkey populated by an ideal citizen, a “pious Muslim Turk whose subjectivity and vision for the future is shaped by an imperial Ottoman past overlaid onto a republican state framework, but divorced from the Kemalist project” (White 2013, p. 9). The AKP regime has deliberately used religion both as an ideology and a counter force to “sacralize the majority” (Yabancı and Taleski 2018) and distract the public when “mounting political and economic challenges” are encountered, and religion thus becomes an instrument with which populists can undermine opponents, casting them as “religiously unfit” (Yabancı and Taleski 2018, p. 283). For example, when the Turkish Lira price fell to an all-time low, Erdoğan reassured the public, “don’t forget, if they have their dollars, we have our people, our God. We are working hard. Look at what we were 16 years ago and look at us now” (Staff Reporter 2018a). The sceptical or critical factions have been warned of a “heavy price” they will pay as “the people” burned foreign currency such as US dollars in support of the Turkish government and President as they “opposed” the “outside” forces (Staff Reporters 2018b; Staff Reporter 2019).

The AKP has been particularly successful in harnessing the negative emotions of the Turkish public. Yilmaz, for example, notes that negative emotions such as fear have been the dominant constitutive components of modern Turkish nationhood, and among the deep conviction of Turkey’s nation-builders, who attempted to create a homogenous nation of desired citizens by assimilating or eliminating the ethnic, religious and political minorities (Yilmaz 2021a). Yilmaz argues that the AKP draws upon “fear, anger, rage, desire to own the homeland forever”, a “need for a smile”, a desire to “sacrifice blood for the country, and desire to enjoy freedom of the God-worshipping nation”, along with feelings of “victimhood, resentment and siege mentalities” (Yilmaz 2021a, p. 3) in order to build a new Islamist Turkey ruled by Erdoğan. Indeed, the AKP exploits these negative emotions, and constructs “not only the ethnic, religious and political minorities (non-Muslims, Kurds, Alevis, leftists, liberals, democrats) as undesired citizens, but even the country’s majority (practicing Sunni Muslim Turks) have been treated as second class (merely tolerated but not desired) in the citizenship hierarchies” (Yilmaz 2021a, p. 2).

The civilizationalist stance inherent in Islamist populism is not bound to nationalism alone. The *ummah* is transnational and transnational populism occurs where the ideology is shared beyond geographical borders. Indeed, as Moffitt has observed, “populism can exist without nationalism, and indeed can go beyond nationalism—more so, it can also go beyond the nation-state” (Moffitt 2017, p. 421). For example, Turkey has elected a populist and nationalist Islamist government in the form of supposed Muslim Democrats of the AKP (Yilmaz et al. 2017). Over time, however, the government has moved beyond nationalism, and a single leader has re-fashioned himself as a “leader of the Muslim World”

or “the hope of the ummah” (Yilmaz 2018). Taking this populist narrative on a global scale in the Muslim World (Yilmaz et al. 2017, p. 59), Turkish leaders are actively creating a shared “brotherhood” bond across the Muslim world, based on trade and public support for causes such as Palestine and Kashmir. The Turkish government, then, is exporting its ideologies through state media and the cooperation of its military (Kaushik 2020; McCarren 2020; Akca 2019, pp. 1–8). Erdoğan is generally positioned as the “voice” of the Sunni Muslims against the “others”, which include the non-Muslim world. This is reflective of a religious populism that categorically constructs an *ummah* or “people” and depicts them in conflict with a constructed “other”: Western countries, global institutions run by these countries, and westernized people within their own dominions (Yilmaz et al. 2017). In this Islamist populist narrative which is at times pro-violent, the faithful are encouraged to sacrifice their lives and, if needed, resort to violence for this political project (Yilmaz and Erturk 2021; Yilmaz 2021b).

Islamist populist leaders also like to identify with key religious figures from early Islamic history. Thus, the leader’s ability to link with sacred leaders and figures of the past is an important aspect of religious populism that needs to be explored. For example, Erdoğan positions himself as the Caliph of a neo-Ottoman Turkey, and Imran Khan has increasingly expressed his desire to be a leader like Osman the Great, and that he seeks inspiration for leadership from the Prophet and his companions’ lives (Ummid.com News Network 2018). This association with historical religious figure also helps populists create populist religious “heartlands” (Taggart 2004). Imran Khan has thus galvanized popular support, and has been elected by and large due to his populist Islamist agenda and rhetoric that projected building a “New Pakistan”, modelled on the ideal state of Medina dating back to the days of Prophet Muhammad (Bukhari 2018).

Thus, Islamist populism involves exploiting religious notions and negative emotions in the public, in order to mobilize “public support in contests over power and resources based on an ummah-based political identity” (Hadiz 2018, p. 567). Islamist populism is widespread, and here, we have only been able to describe a handful of the movements, leaders, and parties that may be placed in this category. Yet, already we can see what these movements have in common: a populist framing of the world that takes on nationalist and civilizational forms, and a framing of material and social injustice in Islamic terms. Indeed, inequality and social injustice are claimed by Islamist populists to be caused by elites abandoning Islamic values, or the influence of “outside” powers hostile to Islam. Islamist populist leaders actively present themselves with religious symbolism, imagery and language to become a more coherent part of “the people”, and use religious populism as means to distract attention from pressing issues or consolidate their power. Finally, only a return to Islamic values, Islamist populists argue, will protect “the people” or the *ummah* from injustice, because justice is inherent to Islam.

5. Hinduism and Populism

The relationship between Hinduism and populism is most evident in India, and in the political movement known as Hindu Nationalism. Hindu Nationalism began in the 19th century, when Hindu “spiritualists and social reformers” began to claim that Hindus were a “single distinct people” who were “victims of powerful foreign elites” (McDonnell and Cabrera 2019, pp. 485–86). The election victory of the right-wing populist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the 2014 general election established these Hindu nationalist ideas—in the form of the philosophy Hindutva—at the highest levels of government in India.

Broadly speaking, Hindutva philosophy is a romanticized version of the ideology of Hindu nationalists, stressing the “common culture” of the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent (Pirbhai 2020). This “uniform culture” has taken inspiration from ancient Hindu texts such as the Vedas and Upanishads to draw its values and code of life (Pirbhai 2020). The Hindutva ideology considers Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism as offshoots of the Hindu culture and religion. Furthermore, it views Christianity, Islam and Parsi religions as “outside” religions and seeks to bring back those former Hindus and their offspring who

converted to these “alien religions” back to the true origin of “Hinduness” (Ramachandran 2020, p. 22; Human Rights Watch 2020). Unsurprisingly, Hindutva has been used as a tool to consolidate a singular identity for nationalistic purposes in the region. “Hindutva” was coined by Bal G. Tilak, and later taken up by the founder of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) K. B. Hedgewar in 1925. Since 1925, Nagpur has become the breeding ground for this ideology, which has engulfed India like a wildfire in recent decades (Anderson and Damle 2005). K. B. Hedgewar established RSS after breaking away from the ruling Indian National Congress (INC) due to the “soft” means they employed to gain independence from the British, and their closeness to the Muslims during the Khilafat Movement of the First World War (Anderson and Damle 2005, pp. 24–30).

Hedgewar was a radical separatist who used the Hindutva ideology as means to further build a nationalistic identity that sought ways to remove any non-Hindu socioreligious elements from South Asia. He focused on keeping the RSS away from politics, and instead, gave them training in order that they become “proper young Hindus” and revert back to the Hindu way of life and thinking in order to gain liberation from the polluted way of living influenced by the colonizers (the British and Muslims). Later, under the leadership of M. S. Golwalkar, who became leader of the RSS in 1940, the RSS remained under the radar of the British power by actively taking part in World War Two and rejecting participation in the Quit India Movement spearheaded by the INC (Anderson and Damle 2005, pp. 29–35). The Second World War period was a significant time for the RSS which demonstrated the paradoxical nature of their ideology. Under Golwalkar, the membership steadily grew and men actively took part in military service to gain military training and skills. However, at the same time, the RSS opposed the colonial way of life it saw as an antithesis of Hindutva. The widespread participation of RSS members in the Second World War, along with physical training programs propagated by the organization, inculcated a militarized element into the Hindutva movement as the group increasingly looked for self-rule ideologically, politically and military in line with the “Hindu way of life” (Anderson and Damle 2005, pp. 29–35).

The RSS did not overtly partake in the independence movement. Rather, they played a major role in instigating and compounding the partition riots and killings in 1947 (Anderson and Damle 2005, pp. 24–26). Equally, due to the “secular” tendencies of Indian Prime Minister Nehru, they refused to accept the national flag of India and opposed his form of government, arguing it was not in line with Hindutva philosophy. Rather than a tri-coloured flag, the RSS—to this day—demands that the flag be of saffron colour to depict the true essence of “bharatmatta” or “Mother Bharat” (Anderson and Damle 2005, pp. 24–26). The RSS was banned after the murder of Gandhi, and several of its leaders were jailed (though they were later acquitted). In recent decades, the RSS has at times acted to incite and exacerbate riots against minorities such as Muslims and Sikhs in India. For example, “Cow Lynching” is a common mob violence tactic encouraged by RSS members to oppress minorities (Ramachandran 2020, pp. 15–20; Human Rights Watch 2020).

After the Partition, RSS membership grew, and the group maintained involvement in community work, education, physical trainings and other grassroots-level activities. To win the popular support of the masses, the organization remained away from politics and dedicated their energy to philanthropy (Chatterji et al. 2020). This provided the RSS with an avenue in which to propagate their philosophy and earn the love of common Indian people, who increasingly felt isolated from the elitist politics and policies of the Congress. Despite this non-political stance, a number of volunteers from the RSS have over time graduated into politicians, forming their own political parties and becoming key stakeholders in the government.

Apart from the RSS, other organizations and parties were also formed in India, having been similarly inspired by Bal G. Tilak’s Hindutva ideology. In 1964, a militant organization, Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), based on Hindu nationalism was founded by M. S. Golwalkar and S. S. Apte. This group played a crucial role in the politics and violence that surrounded the Babri mosque/Ayodhya issue (Lochtefeld 1994). Shiv Sena was founded

in 1966 on issues of unemployed Marathi youth and xenophobic politics. Later, the Janata Party was formed in 1977 on primarily political issues as opposed to religious (Ahmed and Balasubramanian 2010). The party had opposed the undemocratic move of Congress Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of imposing emergency in India. However, it drew its support overwhelmingly from Hindus (Ahmed and Balasubramanian 2010). Finally, it led to the formation of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 1980s, which sought to revive Hindu nationalism. Soon, India was hearing slogans of “Garv Se Kaho Hum Hindu Hain” or “Say with pride we are Hindus” (Rao 2004).

A prominent example of RSS-groomed and -inspired individuals in politics is that of Narendra Damodardas Modi. However, even earlier, RSS ideology drove individuals such as Atal Bihari Vajpayee to set up the BJP in the 1980s. Vajpayee later became the first non-Congress Prime Minister of India; at the time, he was celebrated by the West and the majority of Indians as a liberator of the people of India from the shackles of an elitist rule that dominated India under the Congress party since 1947. Compared to Modi, he is a moderate; however, over the years, Vajpayee consistently failed to criticize right-wing elements and factions in Indian society, and was an open supporter of the RSS. A short time before his death, he openly condemned those who tried to point angry fingers against the RSS for their role in communal violence. Modi too was hailed as a hero and champion of the ordinary people, irrespective of his extreme right-wing ideologies and actions, e.g., the Gujrat Massacre (Hosen 2020). During Modi’s terms as Prime Minister, Hindutva ideology has engulfed not only the politics, but has altered the social fabric of Indian society (Human Rights Watch 2020; Jaffreot and Tillin 2017, p. 184). From revoking the autonomy of Indian-held Kashmir, to instigating security forces that led to violence against students protesting across India against the Citizenship Amendment Act, the BJP has become the brains and body of Hindutva ideology (Human Rights Watch 2020).

The BJP adapted Hindutva to a populist–nationalist framework, in which Hindus are identified as “the people”, and secular nationalists (such as the former governing party Indian National Congress) are demonized as “elites” beholden to foreign ideologies (especially secularism) (McDonnell and Cabrera 2019, pp. 488–90). Muslims, and to perhaps a lesser extent Christians and certain other religious minorities, are “othered” by the BJP, and categorized as enemies of “the people” (McDonnell and Cabrera 2019, pp. 488–90). Understanding the role of Hinduism in the BJP’s matrix of nation, people, religion, and culture is complex. Curiously, while there is an enormous amount of literature on right-wing populism, there is a dearth of literature on right-wing populism in India, and especially on the relationship between religion and populism in India. In one of the few articles written on this important subject, McDonnell and Cabrera argue the BJP is no more “religious” than the right-wing populist parties of Western Europe, which characteristically call for “Judeo-Christianity” to be made the *leitkultur* of their respective nations (McDonnell and Cabrera 2019, pp. 495–96). Through a series of interviews, McDonnell and Cabrera find that the BJP and its supporters do not see Hindu nationalism as primarily religious. Rather, “the people” are identified not by their practice of a form of Hinduism, but are comprised of “all those in India who loved their country” (McDonnell and Cabrera 2019, p. 488). They note, for example, Minister for Road Transport and Highways and Shipping, Nitin Gadkari’s explanation that “the meaning of Hindu means those who are here. Those who are born here, those who are loyal to this land”. This could include Muslims and Christians in India, he added, since those communities had been Hindu before conversion and so were “Hindu by character, by culture” (McDonnell and Cabrera 2019, p. 488). The same narrative also applies to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019; it seeks to alienate undocumented factions—which are mostly Muslim migrants, several generations down as well, who cannot prove they were born in India (Human Rights Watch 2020).

McDonnell and Cabrera are, of course, not so naive as to take these comments at face value. They describe how the BJP—much like the European populists they so resemble—deploy religion in order to construct “the people” and their “enemies”. They note how Manohar Lal Khattar, BJP chief minister of Haryana state, explicitly cast Muslims as “others”

who offend the Hindu people's values, saying: "Muslims can live here, but in this country they will have to stop eating beef" (McDonnell and Cabrera 2019, p. 493). Yet, McDonnell and Cabrera do not argue that the BJP are promulgating a truly "religious" populism in the sense that the BJP are attempting to increase the number of Hindu religious believers in India. Peker agrees largely with this approach, and argues that Hindutva is a "weak and opportunistic" engagement with the teachings of Hinduism (Peker 2019, p. 26). According to Peker, Hindutva is a primarily political ideology which Savakar devised as a response to the rise of Pan-Islamic political movements among Indian Muslims, which he believed ought to be countered by a similar movement among Hindus (Peker 2019, p. 22). The BJP's Hindutva is used to help frame "the people" in an ethno-cultural manner, yet also as a "non-elite underdog" (Peker 2019, pp. 31–32). Elites and minorities are framed as "internal outsiders" to India, who are said to be collaborating with "external outsiders—primarily Pakistan" (Peker 2019, pp. 31–32). Together these "others" are blamed by the BJP for all of India's society problems (Peker 2019, pp. 32–33). More interestingly, Modi identifies "Congress leader Rahul Gandhi" as "a shahzada (princeling) of the Delhi Sultanate", and in doing so, associates him with the period of Islamic rule (Peker 2019, p. 32). Conversely, Modi on the one hand "stresses his own underdog background as a *chaiwala*", yet also presents himself at times as a "humble yet anointed Hindu leader" who is in certain posters "sacralised with a halo indicating Hindu symbolism of gods who glow like surya (the sun god)" (Peker 2019, p. 32). Equally, the BJP, and other supporters of Hindu Nationalism, attack the Indian constitution over its supposed "pseudo-secularism", which they claim favours non-Hindus, and Modi has himself called for Congress to "stop hiding behind the burqa of secularism" (Peker 2019, p. 32). Overall, while the BJP much resembles the identitarian populists of Europe, insofar as both use religion as a civilization-based identity marker in order to construct "the people", the BJP are more closely connected with Hinduism than the "Christianist" parties of Europe with Christianity (Peker 2019, pp. 33–34).

It may, however, be that the word "religion" may be misleading when applied to Hinduism, at least as the BJP apply it in India. Modi, for example, has stated that Hinduism is not a religion, but a way of life (Staff Reporter 2015). Thus, it may even be that concepts of religion and culture, and their relationships, differ so widely across societies that labelling the BJP's populism as either a form of "religious populism" or "identitarian populism" may simply be misleading. More research into the complexities of non-Western forms of religious/identitarian populism is, then, required to improve understanding.

6. Buddhism and Populism

The power of religion to create emotional responses is sometimes exploited by small but highly influential radical religious groups, and used to remake the social relations between religious groups in ways conducive to their nationalist ideologies/desires. This occurs across many societies, yet the relationship between Buddhism and populism is rarely discussed by scholars. Greater examination of Buddhist nationalism and nationalist Buddhist creeds, which are politically important in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, would help scholars to comprehend the rise of religious populism not only in Asia, but across the world.

Myanmar is a multi-ethnic country; no ethnic group comprises more than 2% of the national population. However, 89% of the population identify as Buddhists. This has allowed for the emergence of Buddhism not only as the national religion, but also as the core identity of the nation. Buddhists have therefore become identified as, in a sense, the "homogenous" majority and, therefore, "the people" of Myanmar. In other words, the ethnic diversity of the country has made it impossible for Myanmar's people and government to have an ethnic-based conception of its nation and people, and instead, has led to a religion-based classification of peoples and nationalist understanding of Buddhism. This is not a recent development, as the "To be Burmese means to be Buddhist!" slogan of the 1940s movement for independence demonstrates (Artinger and Rowand 2021).

As Myanmar practices a largely religion-based classification of its peoples, aimed at uniting various ethnic groups into a homogenous Buddhist majority, populism in Myanmar has arisen upon notions of religious nationalism (Thu 2021). Buddhist populist rhetoric in Myanmar constructs the Buddhist majority as “the people”, and the Muslim minority population as an “other” threatening the Buddhist identity of the people and the nation. To a degree, antagonism between Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar has its origin in the colonial era, when Burmese were excluded from the economic life by the British, while Muslim minorities were brought in from neighbouring Muslim regions to meet the labour needs of the Colonial administration. This state of affairs means that Muslim minorities are historically associated with the country’s colonial history. However, populist efforts to demonize Muslims as a threatening other have occurred only in the past three decades. An early example was the manner in which populists used the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas by the Taliban to demonstrate the alleged hostility Muslims felt toward Buddhists, and furthermore, to construct an enemy image/stereotype of Myanmar’s Muslim minority (Thu 2021, p. 208).

The first decade of the 21st century witnessed prominent democratic reforms in Myanmar, making the country an electoral democracy after decades-long rule of an authoritarian regime. In 2012, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi won the national election with her National League for Democracy (NLD) party, and was elected State Counsellor (head of government, equivalent of prime minister) and Minister of Foreign Affairs, where she served until the 2021 military coup. However, democracy in Myanmar brought to the country not pluralism and peace, but increasing religious populism and Buddhist nationalism. Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar is promoted by a number of influential ultranationalist groups, among them Mabatha (or Ma Ba Tha) and the 969 movement. Populism is deeply embedded in the discursive practices of these groups. Mabatha and the 969 movement, for example, claim their political mission is to safeguard “the Buddhist identity of the country” (Fuller 2018). As part of this mission, they claim that Muslims are an existential threat to the nation’s Buddhist identity, and call for the elimination of threats to this Buddhist national core. Mabatha and the 969 movement have become highly influential groups over the past 20 years. Indeed, since 2010, the political landscape of Myanmar has been predominately shaped by the nationalist Buddhist populism espoused by these two groups. Their power extends even into other parties and political movements. In order to secure a majority in elections, even secularist and democratic forces and figures avoided from upsetting these Nationalist Buddhist creeds. For example, en route to the 2015 elections, nationalist Buddhist monks accused Suu Kyi’s NLD of being party favouring Muslims. Fearful of losing the Buddhist majority’s support, the NLD began using discourse conducive to the populist demands of the nationalist Buddhist groups, and shied away from nominating Muslim candidates, leading to a “Muslim Free Parliament” after the elections (Thu 2021, p. 206). Fearful of the Buddhist nationalists, during her term, Suu Kyi turned a blind eye to the growing hatred and violence perpetrated by nationalist Buddhist groups against the Muslim minority (Marshall 2013; BBC 2018).

Suu Kyi could not have been ignorant of the growing wave of violence and hatred directed at Muslims by Buddhist nationalists. Two years before the 2015 elections, for example, the 969 Movement launched an anti-Muslim campaign. A leading figure of the movement, monk Ashin Wirathu, called mosques “enemy bases” and urged Buddhists to boycott Muslim businesses and avoid marrying Muslims. However, the regime ignored Wirathu’s violent rhetoric, and instead promoted his sermons, which Sann Sint, Myanmar’s Minister of Religious Affairs, claimed were “about promoting love and understanding between religions” (Marshall 2013).

Nationalist monks also encouraged the Buddhist population to vote for certain parties in exchange for extracting concessions over their populist claims, such as passing laws banning interfaith marriage and religious conversion (Barany 2015). For example, in 2014, Mabatha used its populist influence over the military-supported Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) to pass legislation known as the “Race and Religion Protection

Laws". While the passing of such laws was celebrated by the monks, critics warned that they could be used against marginalized minorities, especially Muslim minorities in Myanmar (Carroll 2015). Yet, monks associated with Mabatha called for the Buddhist majority to vote for the USDP "since it is the only party that can protect the race and religion of the country" (Thu 2021, p. 207). Nationalist monks' support for the 2021 military coup (Artinger and Rowand 2021), however, suggests that there is interplay between the nationalist monks and their populist agenda, and Myanmar's military elites, and that the two are willing to support one another for entirely opportunistic reasons when the right moment arises.

Unlike ethnically diverse Myanmar, 70% of the population of Sri Lanka is Sinhalese Buddhist, making them a powerful majority group. Tamils are the largest minority, and constitute around 15% of the population, while Muslims, Hindus and Christians together make up less than 13% of population (Department of Census and Statistics 2012). This puts Sinhalese Buddhists in a powerful position, and has allowed them to largely determine Sri Lanka's political agenda and identity.

Since the end of colonial rule, populism has been employed by Sri Lanka's political leaders as a political strategy aimed at constructing and, when necessary, mobilizing "the people". Political leaders have often tailored their rhetoric in line with typical populist binaries (the people vs. the elite; us vs. them) in order to appeal to the majority Sinhalese Buddhists and garner their support (Stokke 1998; Bush 2003; Devotta and Stone 2008; Jayasinghe 2021). Moreover, as part of this populist rhetoric, they frequently referred to minority groups—particularly Tamils and Muslims—as threats to the people of Sri Lanka and the nation's Buddhist and Sinhalese identity "in order to win the rewards of power" (Jayasinghe 2021, p. 178).

Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism (SBN) has thus been the driving force behind populism in Sri Lanka (Jayasinghe 2021, p. 178). It first emerged as the force capable of mobilizing popular resistance against colonial rule in the second half of the 19th century. During the colonial period, non-Sinhalese Buddhist minorities were perceived as outsiders brought into the land by the British and who also collaborated with the British and perpetuated their rule. British colonial "divide and rule" tactics meant an overrepresentation of the Tamil population in official positions, and further fuelled Buddhist nationalists' resentment toward Tamils and other minorities, who were frequently seen as "the enemy other" collaborating with the British (Devotta and Stone 2008). Buddhist Sinhalese, on the other hand, conceived themselves as the pure people, "sons of the soil" of Sri Lanka and custodians of the Buddhist religion' (Jayasinghe 2021, p. 180). Following independence in 1948, "electoral politics in the island state quickly became a fierce contest of appeals to ethnicity" (Jayasinghe 2021, p. 180). Buddhist nationalist actors' political domination in the post-colonial era led to the exclusion of minorities from the political and even economic arenas. Sinhalese Buddhist populist-nationalism led to a reaction from Tamils, resulting in Tamil nationalism and a decades-long conflict between the Buddhist Sinhalese-dominated state and Tamil minorities (Uyangoda 2007). In 2009, national group the Tamil Tigers (the LTTE) were defeated by the state forces and the decades-long conflict came to an end. Their defeat was perceived as an SNB victory. This victory made then Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, who also assumed power in 2009, highly popular among the majority populism and he subsequently ruled the country until 2015 (Jayasinghe 2021, p. 183).

SBN provided Rajapaksa with relevant discursive materials to pursue populist politics. During Rajapaksa's rule, critics of his political style and agenda were portrayed as enemies of the nation (SBN) or collaborators with the enemy. Sri Lankan society was divided between the "patriot" (dēshapremi) and the "traitor" (dēshadrōhi) (Jayasinghe 2021, p. 183), with opponents of Rajapaksa portrayed as treasonous enemies. Against this backdrop, Rajapaksa shied away from criticizing the unlawful activities of SBN groups, including violence against Muslims and other minorities, due to the power and influence of SBN in Sri Lankan politics and society.

After the defeat of the Tamil Tigers in 2009, SBN's populist construction of the enemy gradually shifted from Tamils towards other religious minorities, especially Muslims. Muslims began to be accused of deliberately having more children than other Sri Lankans so as to gain a demographic majority and control the state. In a similar way, Muslims were also accused of conspiring against the Buddhist majority through hidden sterilization efforts to suppress the population increase of the Buddhists (Devotta 2018). Muslims are also seen as outsiders supported by rich Muslim countries, and therefore, as both a national and international threat to national unity and the authentic identity of the Buddhist nation (Sarjoon et al. 2016). Muslims' relatively stronger economic performance is also portrayed as threat to Buddhist power. In promoting anti-Muslim sentiments, the activities and preachers of Buddhist organizations such as BoduBalaSēna (BBS, Buddhist Power Army) played a prominent role. Unlike other SBN organizations, BBS "is unique for being almost exclusively an anti-Muslim front" and has carried out many violent anti-Muslim campaigns since 2012 (Jayasinghe 2021, p. 186). BBS efforts were particularly focused on the construction of Muslims as the new enemy of Buddhism and Sinhalese Buddhist Nationalism. Such is the power of these nationalist and anti-Muslim groups that the government of Sri Lanka frequently ignores their violent actions, much as the governments of Myanmar have ignored Buddhist violence against minorities.

7. Judaism and Populism

The relationship between Judaism and populism can be somewhat different to that of the other monotheisms, insofar as "the link between the Jewish religion and populism in Israel does not require mediation between religion's universal and populism's particular claims, since for Jewish orthodoxy there is an absolute correspondence between Judaism as a religion and the Jewish people" (Filc 2016, p. 167). Yet, perhaps the only concrete example of a Jewish religious populism is the Israeli political party Shas. Shas possesses the typical features of a populist party; it is anti-elite, and constructs "the people" and "others" based on existing cleavages in Israeli society. For example, "the people" according to Shas are "all the Jews of Israel" including "the Ashkenazim and Sephardim" (Filc 2016, p. 176). Employing Laclau's notion of a "chain of equivalences", Filc notes that Shas builds such a chain "between three different signifiers . . . the Jewish people, Mizrahim and religious Sephardic Jews". Yet, the party is not beholden to mainstream ideas of "Israelness" defined by "secular European Zionism", but is rather closer to the "Sephardic ultra-Orthodox worldview" (Filc 2016, p. 176). Therefore, while Shas, according to Filc, is inclusive of all Jews outside of the "elite" secular Ashkenazim, it excludes non-Jews, especially "migrant workers" and "African asylum seekers" (Filc 2016, p. 182). The Arabs, while in the "other category", are treated in a more ambivalent manner by Shas, who display sympathy for them as outsiders in Israel, and have called for a Palestinian state. Yet, Shas members have also opposed "mixed neighbourhoods" (Filc 2016, p. 182).

Shas, moreover, opposes modern European secular notions of the necessity of separating the "public sphere and individual religion", and rejects the "neutral state and a pluralistic society" (Filc 2016, p. 173). Instead, Shas claims the state role is to "define and build a common good" based upon understandings of these notions grounded in Judaism (Filc 2016, p. 173). In a typically populist manner, Shas has brought into the public sphere the voices and interests of groups often marginalized, in this case "the Sephardic economic lower classes by stressing a message of Jewish unity rooted in religious values", but it has also sought to "other" non-Jews, and prevented the creation of mixed neighbourhoods (Filc 2016, p. 183). Ultimately, *Shas* is a modern phenomenon that "sees the people as the source of truth and legitimate power, against the claim that God is the ultimate source of both". Yet many populist movements have—like Shas—"strong links" with religion and religious organizations (Filc 2016, p. 183). Indeed, the rise of Shas as a political force, as Luke Howson observes, "is part of the general trend of religious identity becoming an increasingly decisive factor in political preferences for both religious and secular voters", a

trend which has disturbed secular Israelis, who fear Shas' explicit mixing of religion and politics (Howson 2015, p. 403).

Noticing this trend, Rogenhofer and Panievsky go beyond Shas and study Netanyahu's rule for populist discourse; in doing so, they compare Netanyahu, Modi and Erdoğan in terms of their styles of populism (Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020). The study notes that amongst other populist strategies such as banning media freedoms and institutional interference, "Netanyahu's emphasis on Israel's Jewishness all point to a conflation of religion with the national vision" (Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020, p. 1395). Thus, this "Jewishness" has led Israel to frame a number of policies under him that are "religionizing" the national conflict with a result of open aggressive and open discrimination against non-Jewish citizens and residents (Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020, p. 1400). "Netanyahu's ethno-religious discourses nurture a dichotomy between an exclusively defined "Jewish people" and their "enemies", i.e., Israeli Arabs and their Jewish allies" and the authors argue this creates a rift between the ruling government, centrist and left-wing faction within the Israeli society (Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020, pp. 1403–4). Combined with education that promulgates this populist narrative and Nation State Law, the divide between the Jews and the non-Jews, particularly the Arabs, is intense and it has been used by Netanyahu for his populist Jewishness rhetoric (Rogenhofer and Panievsky 2020, pp. 1403–4). Thus, Judaism has been repeatedly used by the state to support an authoritarian populism in the country.

Surprisingly little has been written on the relationship between Judaism and populism, and little research has been conducted on Shas—especially in comparison to other religious populist parties. Much may be learned through greater engagement with Shas and further study of Netanyahu's populism. In addition, there is much to explore of how Israel's conflict in the Middle East impacts its populist narrative at home. Peter Lintl, for example, observed that far right populist governments of Israel have used their power to coerce Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) that received overseas funding, and media and cultural institutes to squash dissent with its narrative, and this impacts its external relations, jeopardizing the peace process (Lintl 2016). Levi and Agmon in a recent study reaffirm this by arguing that Israel's populism is "security driven" rather than driven by economics or culture; in this context too, the Jewish identity and religion have been positioned in a "threatened" space from the surrounding outside to justify the state's actions (Levi and Agmon 2020). There is more to learn about how political parties in power and opposition have both used a Jewishness or Jewish identity for promoting a populist discourse. Perhaps another avenue for research on the relationship between Judaism and populism and Jewish people and populism is the manner in which certain Christian identity populists support and praise Israel and the Jewish people. This is often done to deflect accusations of anti-Semitism, but also simply because many Christian identity populists may wish to imitate Israel—or what they imagine Israel to be—and create similar societies based around a shared religious and civilizational identity. While the role of Jewish people and Judaism in European right-wing populism has been explored, most significantly by Nathan and Topolski (2016), more research would indeed be welcome on the question of the relationship between Judaism and populism outside of Israel.

8. Christianity and Populism

Christianity has a long association with populism, and yet much of what may be understood as Christian populism in contemporary Western Europe, where the populist radical right has gained much electoral power since the turn of the century, has surprisingly little to do with the Christian religion. Rather, as Brubaker and Roy have described, most nominally Christian populism in Europe is identitarian, and draws upon Christian identity but no other aspect of the Christian faith (Brubaker 2017; Roy 2016, p. 186). The ideology of the populist right in Europe is primarily anti-Muslim, and therefore, uses identity markers such as Christian or Judeo-Christian to "other" Muslims and restrict their immigration

into Europe. Thus, we can draw a distinction—albeit somewhat blurry at times—between merely identitarian populist parties in Europe and Christian religious populism.

The identitarian populism of radical right populist parties such as the French National Rally, and the Geert Wilders led Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, for example, differentiates between peoples on the basis of the religion-defined civilizations to which they are supposed to belong, i.e., Islamic civilization, Western (Judeo-)Christian civilization. Yet, these parties, because they take nothing from Christian ethics, theology, or tradition, and are merely concerned with using Christian identity to oppose the entry of Muslims into Western Civilization and protecting secularism, can be categorized apart from religious (and anti-secular or post-secular) Christian populists. National Rally leader Marine Le Pen describes French culture as based upon secularized Christian principles (Morieson 2021, p. 133), while Wilders defends a conception of the Netherlands as belonging to the West's Judeo-Christian and Humanist culture (Morieson 2021, p. 84). In both cases, Christianity is identified as part of a broader civilizational identity in which secularism or humanism is dominant, and Christianity is merely the progenitor of Western Europe's secularism and liberalism (Brubaker 2017).

Another group of radical right populist parties in Europe remain broadly identitarian, but also seek to link their political programme to the traditional or conservative values of the Catholic Church or the various Orthodox Churches. For example, the broadly identitarian populism of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's governing Fidesz party, reinterpreted and "re-framed" Christianity in a "non-universalistic, nationalist way to legitimize [Fidesz] rule" (Ádám and Bozóki 2016, p. 98). Ádám and Bozóki argue that "although neither [Hungarian radical right populist parties] Fidesz nor Jobbik appeared before the electorate as a deeply religious political party, both of them have portrayed themselves as socially conservative, 'Christian' nationalists" (Ádám and Bozóki 2016, p. 98). In doing so, the radical right populists imply an "institutionalized cooperation between them and the large historical Christian churches" (Ádám and Bozóki 2016, p. 98). Moreover, they argue that the "Orbán regime demonstrates that radical right-wing populism employs a quasi-religious ideological construction through which it attempts to mobilize a wider social spectrum: ethnonationalism" (Ádám and Bozóki 2016, p. 98). Describing Fidesz's Christian tinged ethnonationalism as a "surrogate religion", they suggest it "offers a nationalist and paganized understanding of Christianity and elevates the concept of ethnically defined nation to a sacred status" (Ádám and Bozóki 2016, p. 98). However, despite the secularized nature of the Hungarian electorate, "both Fidesz and Jobbik tend to refer to religious values and to seek church support", and in doing so, have created "a link between right-wing populism and religion" (Ádám and Bozóki 2016, p. 99).

If religion is understood as system of ethics, a form of worship and religious practice, or a type of spiritual feeling, Fidesz does not appear to be religious. Indeed, the "Christianity" supported by the party is always one subordinated to politics. For example, while under Fidesz's rule some churches "have been given official church status with all its benefits", these churches have all supported the party or its brand of politics. "Politically less obedient" churches in Hungary, however, "have been stripped" of official status (Ádám and Bozóki 2016, p. 116). In this way, perhaps, Fidesz use state power to grant legitimacy to certain churches, while in return gaining legitimacy from the support of those same churches. Fidesz's religious populism, then, may not contain a "spiritual" element, nor is it grounded in belief in God, but it does involve a close connection with religious organizations that it uses to "other" Muslims and defend traditional sexual relations and gender roles.

Poland's ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) is a populist radical right party that fashions itself as a defender of Polish nationalism and Poland's Christian culture and heritage (Stanley 2016, p. 63). The party's co-founder, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, has declared that Poland's "freedom and independence" is derived from the nation's "Christian heritage", and opposes immigration from Muslim countries on the grounds that it might erode Polish culture and values (Cap 2018, pp. 388–89). Thus, in both its nationalism and

social policies, PiS leans heavily on Christianity and Christian identity rhetoric. Party co-founder Jarosław Kaczyński declares in order to safeguard “freedom”, “peace, stability and economic progress”, and Polish people’s accompanying feelings of being “masters of their own house”, his party will defend the Christian values that underpin Polish national sovereignty (Cap 2018, p. 389). Equally, PiS’s immigration programme is also couched in religious terms. The party argues that while “as Christians, we are raised to be tolerant and respectful of other cultures . . . it is our right to decide whom we welcome to our own house. As there are cultures, there are values, which simply cannot coexist” (Cap 2018, p. 389). Thus, according to PiS, the exclusion of non-Christians from Poland is permitted because Islam is simply not compatible with the Christian values and culture of Poland. This type of anti-Muslim rhetoric is common to populist radical right parties. Yet, PiS does not protest against Muslim immigration on the grounds that Muslims are too socially conservative and religious. Rather, the party claims that non-Catholic “ethics” are nothing but “nihilism”, and that the “re-Christianization of Europe” is a priority of the government (Mazurczak 2019). PiS may be a primarily an identitarian radical right populist party, yet it is impossible to deny the importance of religion and religious values in their political platform. Therefore, it is possible to describe them as a religious populist party.

A religious populism perhaps more genuine than that of PiS, and owing to Poland’s post-Communism religious revival, comes in the form of Father Tadeusz Rydzyk and his radio station Radio Maryja. Rydzyk “promotes, and is the epitome of, a certain version of Polish Catholicism as” (Zúquete 2017, pp. 447–48) what Brian Porter-Szucs has labelled an “ideology of struggle” (Baker-Brian 2011, p. 271). This populist “struggle . . . divides the world between the faithful (the good but excluded, thwarted people) and their diabolical enemies—the enemies of both God and Man, and true forces of Satan”, which have “taken control” of the institutions of both Poland and the Catholic Church (Zúquete 2017, pp. 447–48). While the Vatican and Polish Episcopate have disavowed Rydzyk’s populist discourse, his opinions have a ready audience of “elderly, rural Poles” (Zúquete 2017, pp. 447–48).

In Italy, the right-wing populist Lega Nord (now Lega or in English “League”) has a complicated relationship with the Catholic Church and with Christianity in general. *Lega* is “a clear example of a right-wing populist party that has used religion to define both ‘the people’ and ‘the others’” (McDonnell 2016, p. 13). According to McDonnell, Lega classify “the people” as “culturally Catholic northern Italian”, and the “other” as “Muslim immigrants” who they claim are “seeking to dominate the native population” and “secular elites at national and supranational levels who do not respect the traditions or identities of the people and instead privilege the rights of ‘others’” (McDonnell 2016, p. 13). The party is not always, despite its identification with Catholicism, in perfect accord with the Vatican. Rather, the League is often critical of the Church, which it accuses of siding “with elites and ‘the others’ against the people, leaving the party as the sole constant defender (and saviour) of ordinary northern Italians” (McDonnell 2016, p. 13). Thus, it appears that, while defending Catholic identity, the League is fundamentally opposed to Vatican positions on refugees, immigrations, and racism.

The party’s leader, Matteo Salvini, is “a self-professed, devout Catholic”, yet he started his political life as a communist “with the (National League) NL in the 1990s . . . a political movement that adopted neo-pagan mythologies” (Molle 2019). Yet, in 2018, in “a pre-election rally in Milan, Salvini addressed a cheering crowd of supporters by committing himself ‘to be faithful to my people, to the 60 million of Italians, and to do so by respecting the teachings contained in the Constitution and the Holy Gospel’” (Molle 2019). “This religious language coming from a former communist,” Molle notes, is “atypical of politicians in the nominally Catholic Italy,” yet may be understood as a “reemerging” of religion in the Italian “political arena” together with Salvini’s political life (Molle 2019, p. 151). Yet, in what way is religion reemerging in Europe? Molle suggests that the Lega, like other similar right-wing populist parties, weaponizes notions of a Christian tradition—real and imagined—in Europe under threat from Islam to attack the European Union (Molle 2019, pp. 151–52). Thus, she argues

that “the perception of Muslim immigration as a threat is maximised by the salience of implicitly religious cultural customs in public life” (Molle 2019, p. 158). Furthermore, she writes that “the success of [the League] lies in its ability to use an adaptive mythology that plays on pre-existing religious norms to stoke fears of a decline of cultural homogeneity and a loss of political and economic power” (Molle 2019, p. 151).

Fidesz, Jobbik, and Lega might be termed traditionalist Christian identitarian populist parties insofar as they use Christianity not merely to “other” Muslims, but to oppose Western European-style liberalism and secularism, which they believe undermine national sovereignty. Yet, in Europe, there remains some genuine Christian religious populism. For example, in among the earliest papers on religion and populism, Stavrakakis notes the “populist character” (Stavrakakis 2004, p. 260) of the political discourse used by the Church of Greece and, in particular, its Archbishop Christodoulos. Stavrakakis argues that the Archbishop’s political rhetoric is “organized according to an antagonistic schema. It distinguishes between Us, the forces of Go(o)d (the People as represented by the Church under God) and Them, the forces of Evil (an atheist, modernizing, intellectualist and repressive government and its supporters), constructing thus two chains of equivalences at war with each other” (Stavrakakis 2004, pp. 261–62). This political rhetoric, he claims, “fulfils both criteria highlighted by a discursive approach to populism: a central reference to ‘the people’ and an antagonistic discursive organization marked by the dominant operation of the logic of equivalence” (Stavrakakis 2004, p. 262).

Surprisingly, Christian identity populism has influenced mainstream politics in the United Kingdom. British politicians, it has been said, do not “do God” (Wheeler 2014). Yet, while the pro-Brexit UK Independence Party (UKIP) could not be realistically described as a Christian party, it published a “Christian manifesto” in which the party set out to show that its policies were pro-Christian (UKIP Policies for Christians: An Overview 2015). Party leader Nigel Farage also called upon the British government to stand up for its “Judeo-Christian” values when combating Islamic extremism in the UK (Moodley 2014). “Judeo-Christian” is here being used in a relatively secular sense, and essentially meaning somebody who is not Muslim and broadly accepting of British cultural norms (Topolski 2016). Yet, Christianity is explicitly mentioned and praised, and identified with Britain, its history and values. Christianity does, therefore, have some role to play in identification with Britain and support for Brexit, even if it is merely part of the matrix of British identity. For UKIP, as for other populist radical right parties in Europe, Christian identity is used to define the British ingroup, and to exclude “others”, especially Muslim immigrants.

There also seems to be a relationship between Anglican belonging and support for the campaign for Britain to leave the European Union, Brexit. Smith and Woodhead examined the relationship between being Christian in the UK and supporting Brexit (Smith and Woodhead 2018, p. 206). They found that UK evangelical Christians—like their US counterparts—tend to support populist leaders and causes, drawing upon polling data gathered shortly after the 2016 (Brexit) referendum. They also found that “identifying as Church of England (Anglican) is an important independent predictor of voting Leave even when other relevant factors like age and region are corrected for”. On the other side, they also uncovered that “self-defined English evangelicals” are more likely to support Britain remaining inside the European Union (Smith and Woodhead 2018, p. 206).

Building on the work of Stavrakakis, Papastathis and Litina note how the Church in Greece occupies a powerful position in society, enjoying a monopoly on religious power in a nation which is “perhaps one of the most unsecularised states in Europe” (Papastathis and Litina 2018, p. 267). They observe that elements of the Church—most prominently Archbishop Christodoulos—have been using a populist discourse, and are therefore urging their followers to vote for populist parties of the radical right. Logically, it would seem at first that regular churchgoers and religious Greeks would, therefore, be more inclined to vote for radical right populists. Yet, through survey of 7396 Greeks, whose religiosity they measured by asking them a series of questions about how often they attend church, pray, and whether they self-identified as religious, Papastathis and Litina found this not to

be the case. This suggests that religious populism in Greece is somewhat ineffective, and that religion itself is a moderating influence on politics rather than a driver of extremism (Papastathis and Litina 2018, p. 276).

Religious Christian populism, as this survey shows, is perhaps less common in Europe than identitarian populism—or what we might alternatively term Christian identity populism—no doubt due to the secularization of European society in the post-war period. However, in the United States, society is less secularized and therefore, religion remains an important influence on politics. From the beginning, American populism has been connected with Christianity. The first true populist party, the American “People’s Party” (often simply called the “populists”), wished to “reignite the lost connection with America’s God-given inalienable rights, freedoms, and values that were under assault by the elites” (Zúquete 2017, p. 447). Equally, as Creech argues that “as their religious ideals shaped the way Populists understood themselves and their movement, they wove their political and economic reforms into a grand cosmic narrative pitting the forces of God and democracy against those of Satan and tyranny” (Creech 2006, pp. XVIII–XIX). Since the beginning of populism in America, then, populism in the United States has often expressed itself in terms blending Christian language and patriotic sentiments, and has found support among different Christian denominations, particularly among evangelical Christians (Creech 2006, pp. XVIII–XIX).

The latest populist wave crashing over American politics is no exception. For example, Christianity and Christian identity were crucial elements of populist the Tea Party movement’s political agenda. Tea Party ideology is a “convergence of libertarianism and fundamentalist religion” that “coalesced into the Tea Party’s concept of American exceptionalism” (Montgomery 2012, pp. 180–81). The movement’s adherents claimed that the American Constitution, “which restricts the powers of government . . . [was] divinely inspired. Other interpretations that allow for a more expanded role for government are therefore not only un-American but are also ungodly and unchristian” (Montgomery 2012, pp. 180–81). Moreover, the Tea Party movement was connected to the “gospel of Christian free enterprise” preached not only by Republican politicians, but “propagated below in the pews” of Southern evangelical churches (Dochuk 2012, p. 19). The Tea Party merely seized upon this growing movement. The vast reach of Southern evangelicalism made the Tea Party persuasive and robust (Dochuk 2012, p. 19). Indeed, through multimedia programming, Tea Party activists are exposed to their movement’s core teachings (Dochuk 2012, pp. 19–20). Over Christian radio airwaves, for instance, they encounter financial experts such as Dave Ramsey, whose call for economic reform echoes Adam Smith, but also the Bible in its blending of libertarianism and family values. “The Great Recovery,” he explains on his syndicated show, “is a grassroots movement spread by people who are tired of looking to Washington for answers. The truth is that the government cannot fix this economy. It’ll be restored one family at a time, as each of us takes a stand to return to God and grandma’s way of handling money” (Dochuk 2012, p. 20).

Following the decline of the Tea Party, many evangelicals began to support Donald Trump as a candidate for President. There are some important differences between the two movements. The Trump movement eschewed the libertarian economic policies of the Tea Party movement, and instead, turned towards a nativist programme of defending the American heartland from “elites” (Young et al. 2019). Moreover, while the Trump movement courted evangelicals, particularly through the appointment of Mike Pence as his running mate, Trump himself could not easily portray himself as a strong Christian; when asked for his favourite Bible verse, Trump replied, “an eye for an eye” (McCaskill 2016). Nonetheless, as Marcia Pally points out, “in the 2016 presidential election, 81 percent of white evangelicals voted for Trump” (Pally 2020, p. 405).

The Trump movement has a special relationship with Trump himself, who they appear to regard as a religious figure and a protector of Christian America from secular “elites”. The Trump movement mixes Christianity together with Judaism and what Bellah called the American Civil Religion (Bellah 1967). This mixing of religions can be seen in the somewhat

bizarre pro-Trump “Jericho Rally”. Held by pro-Trump “Christians (and sympathetic Jews)”, the rally was “designed to mimic the Biblical story of the Israelite army ritually marching around the walled city of Jericho, blowing the shofar, and watching as God demolished the city’s defenses, so the Israelites could conquer” (Dreher 2021). Thus, the rally organizers hoped to encircle the “corrupt institutions of US Government” especially those who conspired to remove Trump from power (Dreher 2021). Speakers at the rally claimed that Trump “did not lose the election” but that “it was taken from him” (Dreher 2021). Christian author (biographer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer) and broadcaster Eric Metaxas spoke at the rally, and at one point, compared anyone who refused to fight to save the Trump presidency to a German who refused to fight against Hitler (Dreher 2021). Another speaker “claimed he received special permission by a rabbi to speak during the Jewish Sabbath. Blowing a shofar—an ancient Jewish musical instrument often used to announce a new Jewish king—painted in American colours of red, white and blue especially for the occasion, he accounted the rally had started” (Dreher 2021).

The curious mixing of American politics with Judaism and Christianity is reminiscent of another interesting aspect of the Trump movement too rarely commented upon by scholars of populism is its Christian Zionism. Sean Durbin, while not specifically writing on populism but rather on Christian Zionism in the Trump Administration, observes how important Zionism is to the Trump movement, perhaps not due to an inherent love of Jews, but due to a belief among many evangelicals in Biblical prophecies about the coming End of Times (Durbin 2020). This may be understood as yet a further connection between the Trump movement and Christianity. This Zionism, while a well-known feature of American politics observable across party lines, seems to be an animating force behind the Evangelical movement, and their support for Trump may be in part predicated on his support for Israel. Indeed, a kind of philo-Semitism (or perhaps more correctly allo-Semitism) is common among some European radical right populist parties, who may use pro-Jewish and/or pro-Israeli sentiment to mask their bigotry and legitimize their politics (Rose 2020).

In an article on religious populism in South Africa, Dion A. Forster—a South African Methodist minister—charts the historical relationship of the Christian churches of South Africa with “the people” of the nation (Forster 2019). Forster argues that the major churches of South Africa participated in a “good” form of populism after 1985, when they began to be guided by the populist Kairos Document, which argued the Christian churches should serve the people—not the white elites—of South Africa (Forster 2019, p. 333). In more recent times, however, Forster argues, churches have begun to serve not the people but the ANC (African National Congress, the governing party of South Africa) and other elites of South Africa. This new Christian populism he calls “a populist state theology” allows South African churches to become “agents of the unjust state” insofar as they use religious language “to deflect criticism against [state] policies, actions, and theology (Forster 2019, pp. 332–33). “This, surely is a destructive, or negative, form of religious political populism,” Forster writes, which “casts ‘the enemy’ as both an enemy of the state and of God” (Forster 2019, pp. 331–32). In support of Forster’s insights Beyers’ work, while it does not particularly focus on populism, highlights the ways in which religion has become an inseparable part of the state and is used and reused for defending policy decisions, but also in constructing ingroups and outgroups (Beyers 2015). The study indicates that one of the most democratized countries on the continent has been possibly exporting populism and religion, thus other African countries including South Africa can be further studied through the lens of populism, to reveal the very nature of relations between religion and politics.

Populism has long had a significant presence in Latin America. As early as 2012, scholars noted how in Latin America “the relation between religion and politics . . . manifested itself in a certain tendency towards religious populism” (Berntzen and Bjune 2012, p. 15). In perhaps the most obvious example of a relationship between religion and populism, Brazil’s right-wing populist president Jair Bolsonaro has risen to power, in part, through support from “Brazil’s conservative religious groups, such as the Neo-Pentecostal churches and Charismatic Catholics (those who pledge formal allegiance to Rome but

adopt Pentecostal-style worship practices)” (Knoll 2019, p. 227). In an article describing the movement, and the surprise its success engendered among elites and the intelligentsia, Gabriel Feltran (2020) draws on ethnographic research to describe the forces behind the rise of Bolsonaro, and the role crisis has played in driving the movement forward. According to Feltran, behind the populist mass movement underlying Bolsonaro’s rise to power is a redemptive promise that Brazil’s social and political problems can be resolved by ending all social differences: “Bolsonarismo will create a community of equals in a Christian fatherland” (Feltran 2020, p. 95). Feltran describes Bolsonaroism as a movement that “seeks a major shift away from modern politics”, away from “party mediation”, “law”, “pluralism” and “the constitution”, and instead, towards “mass movement . . . male honour . . . identity . . . the gospel” (Feltran 2020, p. 97). Religion, then, appears to be an important role in both Bolsonaro’s rise to power, but also in his conception of Brazil. While religion can be used to define ingroups and outgroups in Brazil, it also appears to be a mechanism through which Bolsonaro believes Brazil’s social differences and conflicts may be overcome. Whether similar populisms exist across the region is unknown, and an answer will require greater scholarly engagement with religion and populism in Latin America.

From this survey, it is possible to surmise that the relationship between Christianity and populism is complex and multifaceted. Religion, in the West, has been so thoroughly banished to the private sphere that mixing religion and politics is often seen as illegitimate, and damaging to both. However, this is not so everywhere in the Christian-majority world. Thus, the relationship between populism and Christianity appears to differ depending on the region(s) and especially the religiosity of the people within. What the Christian populisms have in common, however, is that they often place Christianity within a “sacred matrix” of ethnos, nation, and civilization, in which Christianity acts as a signifier of all three.

9. Conclusions

The growing prominence of religion in politics is evident in populist rhetoric dominating political life across the world. Religious populism is a reality in the 21st century. It exists in both relatively secular societies and deeply religious ones. Leaders and parties have employed it in varying contexts to different degrees. Populism, whether understood as a set of ideas or thin ideology, a strategy, or a style, seems to find a fertile ground in religion(s) and frequently attaches itself firmly. By attaching religion to the populist “us vs. them” and “people vs. elite” narratives, populists can exploit existing religious divides within the population, but also create new divides which did not previously exist. For example, populist parties in Western Europe categorize “the other” based on nationalism, religion and civilizational aspects as they express their distrust of religious minorities and migrants. Additionally, beyond parties commonly identified as populists, leaders of non-populist parties have also sporadically used religious rhetoric, including figures hardly associated with populism such as David Cameron (Staff Reporter 2011).

There is a need, then, for scholars to explore the various facets of religious populism. Scholars, for example, remain silent on the role Christianity and Islam play in African populism. This is particularly unfortunate, because in Sub-Saharan Africa, millions of believers live in fragile yet democratic states where populism may easily become a significant force in politics. At the same time, the secularized use of religion in religion-based identitarian populism, and in particular, its civilizational aspects, are widely explored in Europe and Western countries, but vastly less literature exists on identitarian populism outside the West. For example, Buddhism and Hinduism are two of the major religions of the world, yet apart from the case of Modi in India, their respective relationships with populism have been relatively ignored and underreported. Moreover, in cases where the BJP’s relationship with religion is studied, the role of religious populism is rarely focused upon.

Islam’s and Judaism’s respective relationships with populism, too, would benefit from greater scholarly engagement. While much is written on the relationship between religion and politics within Zionist and Islamist movements, rarely is the role of populist ideation, strategy, or discourse studied within the same contexts. In particular, scholars

would benefit from considering how religion and populism interact in Israel and in the often turbulent democracies of the Muslim-majority world, where religion has at times been used to construct ingroups and demonize outgroups. Moreover, there are cases in many young democracies in which religious populism has supported autocratic populism. This nexus between religion(s) and authoritarianism needs to be more closely examined in order to understand how religious narratives can begin a process of de-democratization in countries under populist rule, as appears to have occurred in Turkey under the AKP regime (Yilmaz and Turner 2019).

Moreover, scholars would benefit from further study of the various major stakeholders in society and their engagement with the phenomena. For example, religious organizations' response to and engagement with populism, which may take the form of participation in religious populism, or indeed countering religious populism, is an area rarely studied but which may prove highly useful to scholars interested in combating populism in its various forms. Furthermore, the media's role in transmitting or countering populism is of key importance, especially in regard to social media and its widespread use. For example, the populist religious occurrence of "cow lynching" in India or, more generally, the role of "fake news" in promoting religious populism are key issues that need to be explored in the context and beyond Western politics. Given the nature and widespread use of mainstream and social media across the entire world, it is also important for scholars to begin researching the role of religion in transnational populism. The contemporary literature on transnational populism, while not large, provides ample material to begin examining the manner in which religion—perhaps through the promotion of civilizationalism—may help populist movements move beyond national borders and become transnational.

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