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# POPULIST MOVEMENTS AND THE RELIGIOUS. TOWARD A RETURN OF THE THEO-POLITICAL?

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Populism is on the rise, as are academic studies on populism. However, already in 1969, in their seminal work *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics*, Ernest Gellner and Ghita Ionescu wrote: "There can, at present, be no doubt about the importance of populism. But no one is quite clear what it is. As a doctrine or as a movement, it is quite elusive and protean" (*italics in original*).<sup>1</sup> More recently, Rogers Brubaker asked "Why populism?" stressing that populism is certainly a contested concept, but at the end of the day a useful conceptual tool for seizing the core element of the populist repertoire, that is, "the claim to speak and act in the name of the people."<sup>2</sup> This claim is based on an overexploitation of the term "people." "Just as authoritarianism emerges due to an abuse of authority, there is populism when one uses and abuses the word 'people,' pronounced as if the referent were sacred."<sup>3</sup> This sacralization of the people is at the heart of populism's specific political style. Given this overemphasis on the "pure people," almost deified, set in opposition to the "corrupt elite,"<sup>4</sup> always demonized, it is all the more puzzling that the relations between populism and religion were not, for a long time, studied in detail.

The first full-fledged study of the relationship between religion and populists-or to be more precise right-wing populists-was the edited volume of Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy, which, apart from presenting ten insightful case studies (mostly European), views religion "first and foremost as a marker of identity, enabling populist parties to distinguish between the good 'us' and the bad 'them.'"<sup>5</sup> Christianity becomes a symbol of true Europeanness and binds 'us' together against the 'others,' the Muslims, who have settled in Europe, but have an exogenous religion. Christianity is not a matter of believing but of belonging. By introducing the division 'us' versus 'them,' Marzouki et al. stress the fact that populism is not only based on the opposition people/elites, but also on the opposition 'we' (the

members of the group) against 'they' (the outsiders). Populism is thus a two-dimensional phenomenon: vertical (people/elites) and horizontal (insiders/outside).<sup>6</sup> Religion is clearly an activating factor of the horizontal division. However, it is religion understood in a weak sense. Not as a set of creeds and practices, but as historical heritage.

In the wake of the seminal work of Marzouki et al., additional research on populism and religion was undertaken. DeHanas and Shterin have closely looked at the contexts and ways in which religiously inflected populist styles have become instrumental in populist politics.<sup>7</sup> Norocel and Giorgi have conjoined the religious and gender dimensions in order to see how they are mobilized in discourses and strategies of the right-wing populist parties.<sup>8</sup> Cesari has gathered a wide range of studies of populist movements in Europe and beyond, stressing the strong "us" versus "them" divide that exclusionary populism reinforces constantly.<sup>9</sup>

Our special issue examines the connections between religion and populism by taking seriously the sacredness given to "his own people" that goes hand in hand with the demonization of the "others," of the "outsiders." We encounter here the sharp binary opposition between "friend" and "enemy" that was put forward by the German jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt.<sup>10</sup> This distinction has, for Schmitt, not only a meaning in the political realm; it has also one in the religious realm. Thus, when the populists defend their people and its identity, they are strictly speaking taking a theo-political stand, even if they embrace Christianity not as "religion but as a civilizational identity understood in antithetical opposition to Islam."<sup>11</sup> This civilizational Christianity is strongly asserted in Italy by the Lega under the leadership of Matteo Salvini, as demonstrated in the two articles on Italy included in this special issue.

Many European countries are familiar with this political use of the Christian referent, carried by various political parties. It can be seen in Poland with the Law and Justice Party (PiS), in Hungary with the Fidesz Party, and in Austria with the Freedom Party (FPÖ). It also exists in Germany with the Alternative for Germany (AfD), in Sweden with the Sweden Democrats, and in Finland with the True Finns Party. In France the niche is occupied by the National Rally, led by Marine Le Pen, and by a newcomer, whose identity-based tendencies are even stronger, the Reconquest movement of journalist and successful writer Eric Zemmour. Swiss prosperity has not prevented the creation of the same type of movement with the Union du Centre (UDC). All these movements, some of which have come to power, present themselves in the name of the defense of the Christian roots of their countries, and more globally of European civilization, which is threatened today, due to the globalist policy of the social, political, and sometimes religious elites, by the "debordering" of national communities

and the atomization of individual lives. This special issue presents the Italian and Russian cases in more detail.

The Italian case is approached in two articles, from an investigation of the action of the Lega. The first contribution, written by Christophe Bouillaud, takes a historical perspective: it captures the movement over the entire duration of its journey. The author recalls that the Lega originated in the Lombardy League created by Umberto Bossi in 1982. It became, by association with the Veneto League, the Lega Nord in 1989. It has presented itself as the Lega since the general elections of 2018. This last name reflects a political evolution. Initially, the movement adopted a regionalist perspective: it defended the economic interests of the northern provinces of Italy, denouncing the "idlers" of the Mezzogiorno and the central government that organized for their benefit the "plundering" of the industrious populations of the North. But the concern for defending the North also extended to the cultural field: it was necessary to preserve the "Padanian" way of living. The project of the Lega Nord reached a form of radicalism between 1995 and 1999 when it opted for a secessionist program: Bossi wanted an independent "Padania" following the example of Catalan or Scottish nationalists. This temptation did not last: its intention to become a national force, capable of influencing the world beyond its region of origin, led the Lega Nord to reposition itself in favor of its initial federalism, even opening it up to the possibility of a redistributive policy. This "nationalization" of objectives has been successful: the Lega, under the leadership of Matteo Salvini from 2013 onwards, after expanding into Emilia-Romagna, the Marche, and Umbria, is now significantly established in southern Italy, in Puglia, Basilicata, and Calabria, from 2019.

These strategic reorientations do not translate into a real ideological aggiornamento. We hear the same speech from the birth of the Lega: it is necessary to defend the material and spiritual interests of the people. Basically, all the parties share this general precept. In the Lega it takes on a specific meaning from the system of opposition on which it is based: our people is opposed to the others. Ours are defined culturally. Liberal thought defines the people as an elective collective, based on the "daily plebiscite" of which French scholar Ernest Renan spoke. The Lega understands it as a homogeneous totality whose elements are linked by a common way of living, thinking, and acting. Now this cultural constitution finds its core in a religious story. Bossi, making himself the liturgist of the god Po, had in the 1990s rather insisted on the neo-pagan genealogy of northern Italy. However, given the Catholic roots of Veneto and Lombardy, he was led to evoke the Christian roots of his native region. This insistence on Christianity is significantly reinforced by Matteo Salvini, who does not hesitate to place the Italian people under the protection of the Virgin of Fatima. As for the Others, after Bossi targeted the people of the south and the "thieves of

Rome," Salvini points now to Muslim immigrants. When, not without provoking criticism from the Vatican, he brandishes his rosary, as during his tour of Italian beaches in 2019, it is to signify that the Italian civilization, all Christian, will not abdicate before Muslim expansion favored by Europeanist elites.

The contribution of Rita Marchetti, Nicola Righetti, Susanna Pagiotti, and Anna Stanziano narrows the perspective: it focuses on the communication strategy of Matteo Salvini during the years 2018-2019, marked by three consultations of primary importance—European, regional, and legislative. The article studies the messages posted on social media by the leader of the Lega. The authors open their analysis by recalling that this mode of communication is in line with the political imagination of populist movements. We find here the axiom of Marshall McLuhan: the medium is the message. Social media gives the speaker the possibility of producing a message that is both immediate, unfiltered by the radios or televisions of the elites in place, and emotional, unconstrained by the rationalities of official discourse, which populists consider deceptive. Having made this point, the authors propose a two-step development. First, they focus on the content of the sender's speech. Their lexicometric analysis leads them to show that the religious referent is central in Salvini's digital discourse. On the substantive level, the religious is defined, in an expected way, as a support for identity. The leader of the Lega thus bypasses the teachings of the church, and in particular of Pope Francis, which are too irenic from his point of view: religion is not, he explains, a message of universal love, which would make no difference between citizens from here and populations from elsewhere. For Salvini, as Christophe Bouillaud also reminds us, religion is defined as a set of habits and attitudes, as an abundance of landscapes and monuments, inherited from the work of centuries. The principle of catholicity is this: a certain way-national-of living in the world, against which no cosmopolitan ethic can prevail.

Marchetti, Righetti, Pagiotti, and Stanziano then study the reception of Salvini's speech. The quantitative analysis of the threads of discussion constituted after the politicoreligious statements of the Lega leader indicates the constitution of a real community of speech. The latter is, moreover, as the comparison of the years 2018 and 2019 shows, in constant expansion. This indicates that the public debate is now increasingly organized around the question of identity: if Salvini is not able to impose on everyone what to think, he at least manages to say what to think about. The qualitative analysis of the posts confirms this recomposition of the cleavages in this second age of modernity.<sup>12</sup> Many of the readers of the Lega's posts share the desire for ontological security that they express: Italians must be defended against the powers that want to deprive them of their way of life. On the other hand, many others consider

that the Lega's "identitarianism" can only lead to an attack on human rights: for this current, the illiberalism of the extreme right must be opposed by a thought of openness and mobility. This divide was reawakened during the legislative campaign of 2022, which resulted in the victory of a cousin of the Lega, Fratelli d'Italia, which shares the same understanding of the real people. Its leader, Giorgia Meloni, who became prime minister in October 2022, signaled this when she expressed her rejection of liberal deconstructions and affirmed, from her own self-description, the necessary attachment of existences to a traditional normativity, at once national, sexual, familial, and religious: "I am Giorgia. I am a woman, I am a mother, I am Italian, I am Christian."

There is a tendency to consider, on the basis of their often open conflict with ecclesial institutions, that populism with a religious tone is simply the work of political actors. The two articles have suggested that there may be a use of illiberal motives by religious actors themselves, by some of them at least. Salvini has found in some religious associations, in Italy and abroad, relays for his own thinking. Sometimes, it is even entire institutions that tip over: Donald Trump's candidacy was widely supported by evangelical congregations.

Kathy Rousselet indicates this possibility in her study of Russia. Focusing her analysis on the actors who venerate the imperial family, she shows that a whole part of the Orthodox Church defends, from its religious roots, a conception of politics that articulates detestation of the liberal world and nostalgia for the "eternal people." In this current, to which the Patriarchate of Moscow has been able to lend its support, discourses and rites are intertwined. The speeches, like those of Salvini, are in favor of a pure, almost sacred, people. They want to follow in the wake of the Slavophile current that, in the nineteenth century, had protested against the westernizing tendencies intended to make Russia evolve according to the rationalizing and individualistic principles of modern civilization. Their cultural enemy has not changed: it is the Western world, whose moral liberalism, symbolized by its tolerance of LGBT movements, represents the expansion of the Antichrist. To counter this Satanism, it is necessary to awaken the "real people," which still exists, despite the maneuvers of the globalist elites, led by America and the European Union, who want to corrupt it.

The venerators of the imperial family see this real people as being rooted in the Orthodox tradition, which preserves it from both the materialism and immorality of liberal civilization. In order to defend its substance, a principle of strength is needed. This is where politics comes in. Some governmental elites have unfortunately, in the name of an imitation of the West, betrayed the eternal pact between nation and religion. This was the

case in particular with Lenin, who committed the absolute crime of covering up, and probably ordering, the execution of the last czar and his family. It is also the case of the liberals who, in the wake of Yeltsin, are constantly looking to the West. But there are more commendable figures. For some, paradoxically, this is the case with Stalin, who was able to punish the traitorous people and restore a holy and powerful Russia. They also find themselves on the side of Vladimir Putin, whose condemnation of Western "Satanism," participation in Orthodox liturgies, and preservation of the morals of yesterday against the "forces of evil" are in line with their spiritual understanding of the world. But it is obviously on the side of Nicholas II, canonized in 2000, that their affection goes: mixing the qualities of the saint and the hero, he knew how to make himself the defender of the people in its tradition. While, in many cases, populism expresses its religious overtones outside the churches, it is clearly not the case in Russia: the cult of the czar gives rise to prayers and pilgrimages that, like that of Ekaterinburg, are placed under the auspices of the Orthodox Church, not without sometimes using the rituals preceding the liturgical rationalization-from which the Raskol (schism) will come-of the seventeenth century.

This presentation of the Italian and Russian cases allows us to open the discussion on a more general analysis of religious populisms in Europe. Let us first mention their points of divergence. The right-wing populist parties do not all have the same opponents. If they are united in defending their nations against allogeneic elements, they do not always define the Other, who must be rejected, in the same way. In most cases, the Muslims are targeted. Populists consider them unassimilable by the native population: they are blamed for cultivating norms of life-in terms of dress, food, sexuality-that alter the assumed cultural homogeneity of the host society, and for fueling insecurity and terrorism. As for the sexual question, as the reactions to the disclosure of sexual assaults on New Year's Eve 2016 in Cologne showed, populists frequently see them as predators who come to defile white women: the racial question then intersects with the cultural question.

The fact remains that, in other configurations, the enemy is elsewhere. In Russia, for example, while Islam occupies a secondary place in the symbolic economy of the nation, it is not rejected as alien, except when it is secessionist or terrorist: the country thinks of itself as multicultural. The enemy here is rather the Westerner, who extends his hold on the political society. These populist parties do not have the same agenda. In the majority of cases, they want to defend a traditional sexual morality. The Law and Justice government in Poland and the Fidesz government in Hungary have limited access to abortion in this way. Putin's government has banned abortion advertisements. These states also limit the rights of homosexuals. Elsewhere, other parties are less prejudiced, probably due to the greater

secularization of their electorate. This is the case, for example, for the Freedom Party in the Netherlands, which emphasizes, as an element of Dutch culture, the great openness in this area.<sup>13</sup> In France, while it intends to defend the family, the National Rally, which claims to be "laic," is hardly committed to opposing marriage for all, nor does it intend to challenge the right to voluntary termination of pregnancy.<sup>14</sup> It has often been said that these populist movements mix moral conservatism and economic liberalism. Here again, it is necessary to nuance this very strongly: if the AFD in Germany is on a rather liberal line, the same cannot be said of the National Rally, which proposes an interventionist policy.

These parties do not cultivate the same political alliances. This is particularly true at the level of the European Union. Some, such as Fratelli d'Italia or the PiS, are linked to the Conservatives and Reformists group; others, such as the National Rally or the Lega, are linked to the Identities and Democracy group. Until 2020 Victor Orban's Fidesz was linked to the Christian Democrats of the People's Party Group. This distribution is often explained by circumstantial reasons, such as the desire not to sit alongside another party from the same state and share basically the same political niche. But affiliations can sometimes be for more political reasons. Membership in the Identities and Democracy group generally reveals a more Eurosceptic orientation than that displayed by the Conservatives and Reformists group, and is often more supportive of Russian politics. As the positions of the PiS and Fratelli d'Italia during the war in Ukraine indicate, the movements belonging to the Conservatives and Reformists are generally more Atlanticist and simply want to be "Euro-realists."

The various parties in the populist bloc do have some common features, however. Sociologically, they are most often multi-classist, with a lesser presence in the urban categories with high cultural capital and—except where the religious authorities give them a blank check, as in Poland or Russia, or accompany them with an embarrassed silence, as in France for some years now—in the most religious categories.<sup>15</sup> It should also be noted that the economic prosperity of the country does not constitute a brake on the expansion of populism: Switzerland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, and Denmark, which are among the twenty richest countries in the world, are familiar with this partisan formula. It is as if the economic factor were less important than the ontological one: populism seems to reflect the insecurity of a part of the population in the face of the shift in moral reference points caused by the "debordering" of the world since the 1980s and 1990s.

On the ideological level, the populist movements all cultivate the nostalgia of a *Gemeinschaft*, whose members would be united by the sharing of the same values. It is a question of reinventing, in the face of cosmopolitan



projects, an anti-universalist tradition, referring each movement to the social ethics of its own territory, knowing that the national fight is also a civilizational fight: that which opposes the communitarian civilization to the individualist civilization. This design is expressed in the specific articulation that it gives to the relation of the religious and the political. First, let us look at the religious. From the PiS to Fratelli d'Italia and Fidesz, the programs of the populist parties all express the idea that the nation, which must be defended, is a substantial community, built around a religious core that pre-exists the individuals who are incorporated into it. However, according to all populist leaders, our era has forgotten this definition: it has destroyed the organicity of yesterday by opening up political spaces to the dynamics of immigration and individualization. To this breakdown responds a restorative will that is embodied in the exaltation of roots: it is necessary to place the European political order in the orb of Christian culture. This theme of rootedness raises questions. It operates in fact, except in Poland, in largely secularized societies. Its mobilization responds to a double objective. The religious plays, positively, as a principle of gathering. Even if it has been folklorized, Christianity still is a symbolic material, made up of monuments and school memories, which speaks to everyone. When everything seems to be falling apart, the common point remains to which a whole section of the European population is attached, through their family and national lineages. But religion also asserts itself, negatively, as a principle of exclusion and discrimination: it delimits the sanctuary, sets the borders, and designates the intruder. As Dominique Iogna-Prat noted in her study of the monks of Cluny, who in the twelfth century built the West by opposing it to the Jews and Saracens, it allows "to order and to exclude."<sup>16</sup> Adapted to our time, this discourse affirms, in the face of the "tyranny of minorities" (sexual, racial, religious), the culture of the majority.

Second, let us look at politics. All populist movements affirm the sovereignty of the state, to express, without the mediations of liberal constitutionalism, the sovereignty of the people. In this sense, they belong to philosophical modernity, where the decision does not refer to a transcendent exteriority and where, when power uses religion, it is instrumental. This conception of things explains the link with the ecclesiastical institutions: the latter do not have, in the eyes of the nationalist leaders, any privilege of jurisdiction, nor even of veracity. At times, however, one can find points of convergence between the expectations of the ecclesiastical institution and the state institution. In her 2022 presidential program, Marine Le Pen stated: "families are the core cells of society ... the first chain of the national community."<sup>17</sup> It sometimes happens that the ecclesiastical institution supports the policies of the state, like the Catholic Church in Poland or the Orthodox Church in Russia. This condominium has its limits, however. In many European countries, the two powers are opposed: the states reproach the churches for their globalist irenicism, while the churches

denounce their isolationist selfishness. Pope Francis said as much in an interview with *La Stampa* in August 2019, which Marine Le Pen considered "distressing":

A country must be sovereign, but not closed. Sovereignty must be defended, but the relationship with other countries, with the European Community, must also be defended. Sovereignty is an exaggeration that always ends badly: it leads to war ... populist movements lead to forms of sovereinism: that suffix "ism" is never good.<sup>18</sup>

It is doubtful that the recourse of populist movements to the religious register only has a strategic intent. While this invocation of roots is expressed outside the church, according to a subjectivist hermeneutic, by emphasizing "identity more than values,"<sup>19</sup> it should not prevent us from speaking of a real political theology. It can be linked without doubt to the thought of Carl Schmitt, whose force of inspiration has been relayed, from the Russian intellectuals of Izborsk to those of *Nouvelle Ecole*, a journal edited by Alain de Benoist, leader of the "New Right," and by many networks-often globalized-of influence. The Schmittian interpretation of the Christian adventure was built, from the 1920s, around two elements. On the one hand, it insists on the agonistic dimension of the Christian narrative. The religious tradition does not lead to an Apollonian vision of life. One must rather retain the great fight against the forces of evil, which the Roman church led with so much energy, at the time of its medieval greatness. On the other hand, it is based on the restorative power of politics, of which the German jurist found the first theorist in Hobbes. For Schmitt, in substance, in the face of the Antichrist, in the face of the Enemy, a decision-making state is needed, which does not embarrass itself with humanist prejudices.<sup>20</sup> These axioms can be found easily in populist thinking.

This journey within the populist constellation shows us, in the end, a double mutation of politics in the West. The first mutation refers to the transformation of discourses. It was believed that the expansion of secularization had reduced the religious to its sole function of private consolation. Even the Christian democratic parties had put aside their spiritual allegiances. Populism seems to be reversing this trend: in a form that is more culturalist than spiritualist, it incorporates the religious narrative into its very statements. This is not simply a decorum. This narrative, in which a form of return to the theo-political is enunciated, has a performative value: it configures a space of meaning that determines a politics of an organicist type. The second mutation is the recomposition of cleavages. Since their entry into modernity, Western societies have structured their partisan plurality by deploying it around several axes of opposition. The secular question gave rise to a first structuring. The urban question then emerged, followed by the workers' question,<sup>21</sup> and finally the ecological

question. Populism brings us into a fifth moment, distinguishing on the one hand the promoters of universalism, and on the other the defenders of national particularism, often joined by the classical right and even some components of the left.<sup>22</sup> In any case, all parties, even those from previous moments of European history, have now to take a stand in this landscape where the religious question, once marginalized, has become again a main axis of political positioning.

## Notes

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Dominique Iogna-Prat, *Ordonner et exclure: Cluny et la société chrétienne face à l'hérésie, au judaïsme et à l'Islam, 1000-1150*, (Paris, Aubier, 1998).

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