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INTRODUCTION

Populism and religion: an intricate and varying relationship

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1. Introduction to the symposium in *Politics and Religion*

About a decade ago, the relationship between populism and religion was still an under-researched area (Mudde, 2015). Since then, pioneering studies have started to assess this complex relationship, mostly concentrating on Western countries with a Christian imprint. Marzouki *et al.* (2016) focus on the role of religion in right-wing populist movements, arguing that these movements instrumentalize religious narratives. In the volume, Roy (2016, 79–80) reasons that religion takes more the role of an identity marker than an actual belief. Similarly, Brubaker (2017, 1193) has coined the term "identitarian Christianism," which is, first and foremost, characterized by "a secularist posture" as a means of taking up battle lines against Islam. The edited volume by DeHanas and Shterin (2018) on "Religion and the rise of populism" widens the Western-oriented focus by bringing together case studies of populist parties not only from Europe and the United States but also from predominantly Muslim societies in Central Asia as well as from Turkey. While the broadening of case studies is innovative, the volume ultimately refrains from drawing conclusions that go beyond the observations of Roy (2016) and Brubaker (2017). Hence, populists perceive religion in an identitarian way, framing a specific religion (i.e., Islam) as a threat to their own culture (i.e., the [Christian] secular civilization) (DeHanas and Shterin, 2018, 178).

This is where our symposium wants to tie in. By building on previous research, its objective is threefold. First, we attempt to show that populist actors refer to religion in various ways, with religion as a boundary marker, differentiating the in-group from the out-group. In some instances, populists refer to religion to identify the out-group, often Islam, that is deemed incompatible with their own culture. Religion in this scenario is seen as a threat to the domestic society, and populists then primarily focus on the "evil other." The religious threat to these secular societies can be both internal, harming one's norms and values from within, as well as external, looming at the country's border and waiting to take

over or about to carry out an attack on one's own soil. Conversely, the "self" is primarily defined implicitly and lacks religious meaning. Alternatively, populists can also concentrate on the "self," stressing the virtuous components of their society. In this scenario, populist actors refer positively to the "peoples" religion, be it Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, when constructing their own identity. Hence, religion is used to characterize who is part of the in-group, while the out-group is defined as *ex-negative*. The "evil threat" can be portrayed as secular or other religious groups. Yet, the main point is that the "other" is perceived as incompatible with one's own society having its roots in religion.

The second objective of the symposium is to delve deeper into the contextual factors of the specific case studies, as these factors are likely to shape the populist actors and explain how these actors refer to religion. Going back to Weyland's (2017, 65) "contextual opportunities and constraints," national contextual factors help explain the certain use of religious and secular narratives by populist actors. These include but are not limited to the (1) history of nation-building, (2) role of religion in society, and (3) level of secularization.

(1) Regarding the country's history of nation-building, religion will play an important role as an identity marker if, in the populist narrative, the country's statehood was at risk in the recent past or when statehood is still unstable, either due to external threats or internal centrifugal forces. In these countries, religion is likely to play the role of binding the collective together against the background of missing or endangered statehood. In countries where statehood has been stable, religion will play a secondary role as a collective identity signifier and, consequently, populists will abstain from explicitly referring to the domestic religion.

(2) If religion currently plays or recently has played a prominent role in the public sphere, populists will tend to positively refer to this very religion as a crucial identity marker, thus framing other religions or secularism as a hostile threat. However, if the role of religion in society is limited, populists tend to use the narrative of (a particular) religion as alien while framing secularism as central to the own people's identity.

(3) With regard to the level of secularization, we expect populists in countries with low numbers of religiously affiliated people to refer to secularism as a collective identity marker, with religious references used to warn of a threat. In contrast, in countries with high levels of religiosity, populist actors are more likely to refer to religion as an identity marker and frame secularism as a threat.

The third and final objective is to broaden the geographical scope further and include case studies beyond the usual Western focus. The case studies include three regions: Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Indonesia, a predominantly Muslim society, is examined. Moreover, Israel is included as the only country with a Jewish majority. Finally, Germany and the Netherlands, both shaped to a different extent by Christianity, are compared in an article to illustrate similarities and differences between the two Western countries. Hence, the symposium includes societies where a majority of the population adheres to one of the three Abrahamic religions: Islam, Judaism, or Christianity.

2. Country examples

The national contextual factors explained above are to be understood as reference points that help interpret the specific religious narratives of populists. In itself, populism is a polysemic term, with academics disagreeing on what it contains. Some identify populism as an ideational approach (Mudde, 2017), where the "pure people"

are contrasted with the "evil elite." Others describe populism "as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from numbers of mostly unorganized followers" (Weyland, 2001, 14). A third approach treats populism as a political style (Moffitt, 2016), stressing the discourse and style of populist actors. In tradition with the diverse descriptions of populism, the authors of the individual papers referred to different approaches of populism.

Indonesia is the third-largest democracy and the largest predominant Muslim country in the world. It is also a relatively young democracy after the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998, and it is still in a transition process. In their contribution "Religion in Indonesia's Elections: An Implementation of a Populist Strategy," Widian *et al.* (2022) examine three elections in Indonesia, the 2014 presidential election, the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, and the 2019 presidential election. Perceiving populism as a political strategy, the authors argue that religion has become increasingly salient in Indonesia's elections, reaching a height in the 2019 presidential election, where both presidential candidates Joko Widodo, also known as "Jokowi," and Prabowo Subianto used religious tropes to underline their Islamic credentials and underlined these credentials to mobilize voters.

Certain context factors are specific of Indonesia. Becoming independent in the 1940s, the country is still relatively young. In order to keep the multi-ethnic and multi-religious archipelago together, Pancasila became the foundational theory of Indonesia. Widian *et al.* (2022) argue that the multi-religious character of the state is at the heart of Pancasila through the idea of the belief in one Almighty God and that Pancasila still defines modern Indonesia. Hence even though Islam is the dominant religion of Indonesia, populists cannot disregard the principles of Pancasila but instead have to follow these principles and reconcile them with the dominant religion: Islam. The authors show that Indonesia represents an interesting case, as populist politicians, on the one hand, choose an Islamic narrative to attract votes from the Muslim majority, but they also cannot disregard the other voters and have to accept the multi-religious character of the state.

Assessing two different parties in *Israel*, Shas and Likud, Ben-Porat and Filc (2022) argue in their contribution "Remember to be Jewish: Religious Populism in Israel" that religion in Israel functions as a boundary marker, separating "us" from "them." As the only majority Jewish state, religion has played an important role in Israel since the country's foundation. Judaism was important for identity-building, and the Jewish identity functioned as a citizenship marker and demarked territorial borders. The authors stress that religion can function in two ways as a boundary marker. It can explicitly state who is part of the in-group, confirming who belongs to the community, stressing demands for inclusion of previously marginalized groups, and, therefore, expanding the boundaries of democracy (inclusionary populism). However, religion can also serve as an exclusionary marker, focusing on the threat to the nation. From a nativist perspective, the people are defined in ethical or cultural terms (exclusionary populism). The people can thus be understood as an empty signifier, with the term needing to be filled with meaning.

Ben-Porat and Filc (2022) argue that Likud under Benjamin Netanyahu can be described as an exclusionary populist party. The Jewish people are seen as a closed unity that is threatened by non-Jewish inhabitants, such as Arabs and asylum seekers

and cosmopolitan elites. Religion becomes an indicator of loyalty from which non-Jewish citizens are excluded. In contrast, the Shas party can be understood as an inclusionary populist party, demanding the inclusion of Sephardic Jews, Jews that immigrated from Muslim countries. The authors argue that while Shas is an inclusionary party for Sephardic Jews, it also has an exclusionary attitude towards non-Jews and the secular elite. Hence also, Shas, an inclusionary populist party claiming to integrate a marginalized group of people, excludes parts of society. In sum, the authors demonstrate that religion has a double role in Israel, both marking who is part of the in-group as well as a threat marker, illustrating the intricate demography of the country.

In their comparative article, Beuter and Kortmann (2022) examine parliamentary documents from *Germany* and the *Netherlands* between October 2017 and December 2019, analyzing how the German populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) refer to religion. The authors find that the self-other antagonism typically found in populist parties can also be found when the AfD and PVV refer to Islam and Christianity. Both parties share a similar negative perspective of Islam, seeing religion as inherently violent and depicting it as incompatible with domestic society. In Christianity, the picture is different. While both parties view religion in a favorable light, PVV parliamentarians rarely substantiate their comments and instead often remain vague. The PVV frames Christianity in primarily civilizational terms. AfD parliamentarians at times make similar ambiguous comments, while on other occasions stressing their Christian roots and demanding a Christian *Leitkultur*. Hence, the message of the AfD is mixed, occasionally similar to the PVV and other times substantiating their Christian credentials.

Besides providing an empirical analysis, Beuter and Kortmann (2022) also deliver an explanation for the differences between the two countries turning to the specific national context factors. Germany presents a particular case due to the belated German nation-building, the horrific national socialist history, and the subsequent division of the country. Nationalistic ideas were discredited and, to a certain degree, replaced by Christianity as a potential alternative identity marker. As a result, Christianity had a positive connotation and was often praised for having a positive effect on society. The authors argue that this fact, together with Germany's lower secularization rate compared to the Netherlands, explains why the AfD refers to Christianity in more religious terms than the PVV.

3. Conclusion and future research suggestions

The country cases presented in this symposium show how particular histories of nation-building and the specific role of religion in a country's public sphere may impact the way right-wing populist actors deal with religion. In the relatively new democracy of Indonesia, where the "Belief in the one and only God" is enshrined in the national guidelines of Pancasila, and the vast majority of people is religious, populists refer positively to the majority religion of Islam. In Israel, where Judaism is both a nationally binding factor and a territorial boundary marker, and Judaism plays a visible role in the public sphere, populists also relate positively to the country's majority religion. In Germany, where Christianity—to a certain extent—is still prevalent in the public sphere due to the partial establishment of the Christian churches

and, at least for the Christian conservative part of the population, still plays a role as an identity marker, populists speak favorably about the country's majority religion whereas demonizing the "foreign" religion of Islam. Finally, in the Netherlands, a country with a particularly high degree of secularization and religion playing no significant role in the public sphere anymore, there is no need for populists to confess to Christianity. Instead, Dutch populists are more committed to secularism, denouncing Islam as a force that threatens to endanger these secular values.

The results of the studies compiled in this symposium imply the benefit of analyses that account for national or regional contextual factors when focusing on populist narratives (not only) concerning religion. Apart from further broadening the geographical focus, including global areas such as Latin America or other parts of the Middle East, it also appears worthwhile to examine the rather understudied perspective of supporters and voters of populist parties, uncovering their views on religious and secular values and, by that, revealing to what extent supply and demand side agree or contradict each other. In the foreseeable future, the intricate and varying relationship between populism and religion can be expected to remain in the focus of social science research.

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