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# Finding Religion: Immigration and the Populist (Re)Discovery of Christian Heritage in Western and Northern Europe

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**Abstract:** Why and in what ways do far-right discourses engage with religion in geographies where religious belief, practice, and public influence are particularly low? This article examines religion's salience in the rhetoric of leading right-wing populist parties in eight European countries: the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Austria, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. Based on a qualitative content analysis of various documents such as party programmes, websites, election manifestos, reports, and speeches of their leadership, the article offers insight into the functions that Christianist discourses serve for anti-immigration stances. The findings are threefold: first, they confirm previous research suggesting that while these parties embrace Christianity as a national/civilizational heritage and identity, they are also careful to avoid references to actual belief or practice. Second, the data suggests, their secularized take on Christianity rests not simply on the omission of theological content, but also on the active framing Christianity *itself* as an inherently secular and progressive religion conducive to democracy. Third, and finally, they starkly contrast this notion of Christianity with Islam, believed to be incompatible due to its alleged backward and violent qualities. Emphasizing religio-cultural hierarchies—rather than ethno-racial ones—plays an indispensable role in presenting a more palatable form of boundary-making against immigrants, and helps these parties mainstream by giving their nativist cause a liberal and enlightened aura. Preliminary comparisons with traditional conservative parties, moreover, reveal that while some of the latter partially embraced a similar nativism, variations remain across countries.

**Keywords:** populism; religion; far right; Christianity; Islam; Europe; immigration

## 1. Introduction

The question of how migration and religion interrelate has been approached from a variety of perspectives in the social sciences, exploring themes such as integration policies, socioeconomic differences, gender relations, and race/ethnicity (Beckford 2016; Saunders et al. 2016; Frederiks and Nagy 2016). More recently, a related body of work has studied the increasing space religion occupies in the construction of right-wing populist rhetoric on immigrants and immigration in Western host societies. This literature has focused on the multiplicity of ways in which Christianity is invoked in the nativist framing repertoires of populist movements in Europe and North America, especially in opposition to Islam (Haynes 2020; Morieson 2021). What is particularly interesting is the novelty of this phenomenon. Although mostly rooted in the Catholic reactionary movements of the 19th century, far-right political groups in post-war Europe have not systematically expressed their xenophobic and anti-immigrant agendas with overt allusions to religion (Camus 2013). In the United States, too, where religious discourses have always been more prevalent since at least the Cold War, such rhetoric was not traditionally embedded in explicitly anti-immigrant policy perspectives (Hughes 2019).

Since the turn of the 21st century, however, an ostensible change began to occur. A longitudinal quantitative study of right-wing party manifestos in Europe since the 1980s, for instance, has detected a significant upsurge in religious references, with positive appraisals of Christianity and severely negative evaluations of Islam (Schwörer and Fernández-García 2021).

In another longitudinal study, Neumann and Geary (2019) found that in the American presidential discourses since the 1930s, references to Christianity increased since Ronald Reagan to peak with Donald Trump, where the latter also scored highest in hostile assessments of Islam. Other works have confirmed that contemporary right-wing populist movements in Europe and the United States have articulated religion as a nativist identity marker against Muslim immigrants—although, variations notwithstanding, their actual affiliation with Christian belief, practice, values, and organizations remains generally weak (Marzouki et al. 2016).

Why and in what ways does the populist right engage with religion in their discourses, especially in countries where religious belief, practice, and public influence are particularly low? This article provides an overview of religion's salience in the rhetoric of eight right-wing populist parties in Europe to discuss the functions that religiously inflected discourses serve for anti-immigration stances. More specifically, I am interested in a cluster of highly secularized Western and Northern European cases where Brubaker (2016, 2017) has observed the rise of "Christianism" (or "reactive Christianity") in far-right discourses: the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Switzerland, and Austria in the West; and Sweden, Denmark, and Norway in the North. Christianism paradoxically commits to secularism and socially liberal values—such as philosemitism, gender equality, gay rights, and freedom of speech—against the illiberalism they ascribe to Muslim immigrants. Relatedly, their anti-Islamic discourse has been recognized as "civilizationist" as much as nationalist: Their nationalist rhetoric embeds a strong civilizational component that problematizes Islam and Muslims not as solely at odds with the nation, but *also* for the broader progressive values of the Christian-European civilization their nation is deemed a part of, and is supposed to defend (Brubaker 2017; see also Joppke 2018; Moffitt 2017; Roy 2019). This is in contrast to their far-right counterparts in the US, Hungary, or Poland, which lack the same liberal-civilizational emphasis.[1] Table 1 below provides a list of the parties in question and their recent electoral performance.

**Table 1.** "Christianist" Populist Parties of Western and Northern Europe (as identified by Brubaker 2016, 2017).

| Country | Party Name | English Name | Est. | Legislative Elections % (Most Recent) | Legislative Elections % (Highest Since 2000) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Netherlands | Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) | Party for Freedom | 2006 | 10.8% (2021) | 15.45% (2010) |
| Belgium | Vlaams Belang[2] (VB) | Flemish Interest | 1978/2004 | 11.95% (2019) | 12.0% (2007) |
| France | Rassemblement national[3] (RN) | National Rally | 1972/2018 | 13.2% (2017) | 13.2% (2017) |
| Switzerland | Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP) | Swiss People's Party | 1971 | 25.6% (2019) | 29.4% (2015) |
| Austria | Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) | Freedom Party of Austria | 1956 | 16.2% (2019) | 26% (2017) |
| Sweden | Sverigedemokraterna (SD) | Sweden Democrats | 1988 | 17.5% (2018) | 17.5% (2018) |
| Denmark | Dansk Folkeparti (DF) | Danish People's Party | 1995 | 8.7% (2019) | 21.1% (2015) |
| Norway | Fremskrittspartiet (FrP) | Progress Party | 1973 | 15.3% (2017) | 22.9% (2009) |

Although the distinctive nature of these parties' Christianism is well established in the comparative populism scholarship alluded to above, in-depth "studies analysing . . . the different ways in which religion is used by various populist parties are extremely rare" (Morieson 2021, p. xx). A close and equal-weighted empirical examination of these specific parties' official documents and discourses using primary sources in multiple languages, to

date, has not been featured in the literature. Based on a qualitative content analysis, this article addresses that gap through an assessment of the meanings ascribed to Christianity and Islam in their programmes, websites, election manifestos, various reports, as well as the speeches of their leadership to offer further insight into the nature, significance, and functions of their religious framing. The findings reveal a threefold pattern: First, confirming previous research, they indicate that these parties indeed embrace Christianity as a national/civilizational heritage and identity, yet they are also careful to avoid references to actual belief, practice, or doctrine. Second, the data suggests, they instead frame Christianity as an inherently secular and progressive religion conducive to democracy and the separation of church and state. They, in other words, offer a secularized take on Christianity not only by omitting theological content, but by actively arguing that Christianity *itself* is secular. Third, and finally, they starkly contrast the enlightened qualities ascribed to Christianity with Islam, purported to be incompatible with the Christian-European tradition due to its alleged uncivilized, backward, and potentially violent character. Religion, therefore, plays an indispensable role for the construction of the in-group and the out-group, and thus for the justification of anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalist party positions. It also allows these parties to mainstream by presenting their xenophobic and nativist rhetoric in a seemingly progressive fashion. Exploratory comparisons with traditional conservative parties in each country, moreover, demonstrate that mainstream politics has partially incorporated similar nativist tropes to remain competitive. For major center-right parties, variation across countries is observable, where some fall closer to the populist rhetoric than others. Smaller Christian-Democratic parties, on their part, tend to be less inflammatory on the Muslim question, and diverge from these two party families by bringing to the fore more substantive Christian content. In the next section, the article provides a summary of the theoretical literature on populism, religion, and immigration, and considers its relevance for the eight far-right parties examined. Following a note on methodology, in three empirical sections, the article then respectively exemplifies how these parties construct (1) Christianity as heritage, (2) as inherently secular, and (3) Islam as fundamentally incompatible. The last three sections, finally, expand on the implications of the findings through further examples and observations, offer comparisons with traditional conservative parties in these countries to better contextualize the findings, and draw conclusions for the populism, religion, and immigration literatures.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Populism, Religion, Immigrants

The concept of populism gained social scientific salience in the 1960s to study anti-elite political trends around the world (Ionescu and Gellner 1969). Since then, the concept has been applied to a wide range of historical and contemporary leaders, parties, and social movements, both on the left and the right of the political spectrum. Some notable left-wing examples include Peronism in Argentina, Chavismo in Venezuela, and Syriza in Greece; while Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National in France, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Trumpism in the US have often been cited as right-wing cases (Agustín 2020; De la Torre 2018; Edwards 2010; Kaltwasser et al. 2017; for a history, see Finchelstein 2017). The contemporary literature is divided on the definitional and constitutive features of populism, with various schools of thought distinguishing the phenomenon by its specific ideas (Hawkins et al. 2019), performative style (Moffitt 2016), leader-focused political strategy (Barr 2019), or nonorthodox economic policies (Acemoglu et al. 2013).

In line with the purposes of the article, I employ here the ideational outlook to study the visions of the abovementioned right-wing parties that pertain to religion. This approach recognizes populism as a highly moralizing anti-elite ideational construct resting on a vertical juxtaposition between a virtuous and homogenous "people" on the bottom and a corrupt and self-serving "elite" on the top (Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2019).[4] Accordingly, political mobilization should seek to realize the will of the former, which is thought to be undermined by the latter. Rather than adhering to a particular classical ideology such

as fascism or liberalism, populist ideas can selectively mobilize and build on them in a flexible manner (Mudde 2009). Besides anti-elitism, populism is also anti-pluralist, as the "people" is often described in an exclusive sense to delegitimize and denigrate all other claimants to power and rights (Müller 2016). Fittingly, in right-wing populisms, a third group is imagined even more to the bottom of the vertical axis: the "others", such as immigrants and minorities, who supposedly collude with the "elite" to menace the will of the "people" (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008). Here, populist and nationalist frameworks can neatly overlap as populism's vertical hierarchy of "elite-people-others" is interwoven with nationalism's horizontal dichotomy of "insider-outsider" to characterize immigrants both as "other" and "outsider" to the people/nation. Similarly, the "elites" can be on top as well as outside (Brubaker 2020; De Cleen 2017).[5]

Religion, although not a defining characteristic of populism, enters this picture to play a nativist boundary-making role between the "people" and the immigrant "other". Nativism here is understood as the idea that "states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group . . . and that nonnative elements . . . are fundamentally threatening . . . The basis for defining (non) 'nativeness' can be diverse, e.g., ethnic, racial or *religious*, but will always have a cultural component" (Mudde 2009, p. 19, my emphasis). Religion has also been recognized in the literature to potentially offer a rich and unique array of culturally specific resources to populist discourses, which other nativist identity markers cannot. These may involve sacralizing the "people" against enemies in a Manichean good–evil dichotomy, ascribing it a historical myth and memory of chosenness, inspiring a mission of salvation in the face of imminent threats, or even idealizing the movement leader with messianic qualities (Arato and Cohen 2017; Mao 2017; Palaver 2019; Peker and Laxer 2021; Zúquete 2007). Populists, in other words, can find in religion an invaluable set of symbols and affective tools to enrich groupness with an emotionally charged, moralizing narrative. Higher levels of religiosity/religiously-defined groupness in a given polity would be expected to allow for more direct incorporation of religio-theological resources.

The boundary-making role played by religion has been widely documented across the social sciences long before recent works have associated the concept with populism. Social identity theory in social psychology, for instance, holds that as a cognitive process, group affiliation rests on positive and homogenized qualities attributed to the collectivity to establish inter-group differentiation (Tajfel 1978). Religious identification has been recognized here to offer a distinctively "sacred" worldview as well as an "eternal" understanding of the group to enable stronger forms of attachment (Ysseldyk et al. 2010). The scholarship on symbolic boundaries has likewise observed the salience of religious markers in the construction of majority identities vis-à-vis minority populations, which may function alongside racial, ethnic, and linguistic ones (Bail 2008; Trittler 2017). Populist movements can tap into such socially prevalent religious imaginaries and heritage to underpin their nativist vision of "a homogeneous and morally unified body", as well as the illiberal patterns of political action that follow (Müller 2016, p. 27). It is thus of no coincidence that populism's religious appeals and undertones have been studied as a form of political theology in the Schmittian sense, or as a normative endorsement of authority and hierarchy resting on a non-pluralist notion of sovereignty (Arato 2013; Bergem and Bergem 2019; Schmitt 2005). Populism, therefore, can get entangled with religion and religious themes in multifaceted ways, with varying levels of directness and intensity. The next subsection delves into how the theoretical literature pertains to the eight parties examined.

### 2.2. The Eight Parties in Light of the Theory

The rhetoric of the eight European parties studied in this article largely conforms to these definitional characteristics. With variations, these movements refer to the "elites" as the established pro-EU parties, media, and institutions disrespecting the "people's" sovereignty via imposing a multiculturalist agenda that primarily serves the immigrant "others" (Aalberg et al. 2017). Although immigration is not the only issue raised, and they show important differences in many other policy areas (Taggart 2017), these parties share

the commonality of portraying the national and European elites as at best naïve about the threat of especially Muslim immigrants, because they are detached from, and failing to protect the interests of, the ordinary "people" in their respective nations and across Europe (Morieson 2021).

As the theory predicts, their populist discourses are interwoven with those of nationalism. Apart from Switzerland and Norway, these parties function in countries that are part of the European Union (EU), and with the exception of the Swedish Sverigedemokraterna (SD) among the six EU-members, they all belong to the right-wing Identity and Democracy (ID) group in the European Parliament. Ironically, a common goal of the ID group is the protection of national sovereignty against "supranational bodies and/or European institutions"; and given that "culture is the essence of all political action", "the right to control and regulate immigration is . . . a fundamental principle shared by the members of the ID Party" (ID 2019). The SD also embraces Euroscepticism as part of the European Conservatives and Reformists Party (ECR), and the Swiss Schweizerische Volkspartei (SVP) and the Norwegian Fremskrittspartiet (FrP) are resolutely against joining the EU. The Euroscepticism of these parties is strongly correlated to their strong anti-immigration stance, as they believe that the "Schengen and the open-border framework are synonymous with a failed immigration and citizenship policy" (Stockemer et al. 2020, p. 888). Among immigrants, Muslims are singled out as a primary threat to the cultural and material wellbeing of the nation/civilization.

Regarding the question of why these parties have been increasingly utilizing Christianity as a nativist framing tool, two factors stand out: religious demographic change and European patterns of secularization. As for the first factor, in result of postwar waves of immigration, Islam has become the second-largest religion in the continent after Christianity, constituting 6.8% of Europe's population (up from up from 4.1% in 1990) with 50.5 million people. This is in a continent with where about 535 million people identify as Christian (72.2%). Within the 27 member states of the EU, the percentage of Muslims goes down to about 2%, while the Christian percentage remains roughly the same (Pew Research Center 2020). According to 2016 figures, the Muslim population in the eight countries studied ranges between 5.4% and 8.8%, with an average of about 7%. By 2050, this average is expected to go up to 9.5% even in a zero-migration scenario, or to 13.9% in a medium-migration scenario (Pew Research Center 2017). Muslims are on average younger and have higher fertility rates, and these populist parties have been using the demographic change as a way to instill a fear of invasion. Since the turn of the 21st century, they increasingly created a unifying category (and a problem) of "European Muslims" as an homogenous "other" inimical to the "people" (Khader 2016), which exacerbated after 2014 in reaction to a new wave of radical Islamist terrorist attacks and the refugee crisis (Hameleers 2019; Zunes 2017).

The second factor concerns how Christianity itself has been transformed in the continent. It is well documented that Christian belief and practice has been in decline for decades in Europe, and that the eight countries where these parties hail from are among the most secularized societies on earth (Davie 2002). They, for instance, score among the lowest in Europe on belief in God (varying between 11% and 19%) and on the importance ascribed to religion (between 8% and 20%) (Pew Research Center 2018b). Beyond faith and worship, since the late 1960s, Christianity has also lost its relevance for social values, especially due to its standing opposition to divorce, abortion, same-sex marriage, artificial procreation, and other progressive norms and practices widely accepted by the public (Roy 2019, pp. 76–96). As a result, right-wing movements, "like all other political families, . . . had to adjust to an increasingly secular society. The old link between religion and the extreme right has thus been broken" (Camus 2013, p. 107). Given the rapid social dissociation from Christian-conservative values, these parties embraced Christianity solely as a national identity marker devoid of theological content to intensify the dichotomy with immigrants. Rather than a source of morality, Christianity here becomes a secular appeal

to shared ancestry, heritage, memory, and a nativist conception of groupness vis-à-vis Muslims (Marzouki et al. 2016).

In addition to the two factors discussed above, these parties' turn towards religious boundary-making—despite declining religiosity in their respective societies—has also been studied as a constituent of "new racism" in right-wing discourses. Differing from the outdated forms of "scientific" racism, which are rooted in 19th century theories claiming the existence of biological hierarchies between peoples, the rhetoric of new racism predominantly emphasizes cultural differences and inadequacies of the out-group with a view to marking the superiority of the native population (Barker 1981; Tagueiff 1990). Although Muslim immigrants face systematic racialization through constructed equivalencies between their phenotypical features, ethnicity, language, culture, and religion (Meer 2013; Joshi 2016); emphasizing purely religious differences helps Christianist far-right parties to mainstream by disguising their xenophobic rhetoric in a more palatable, culturally-mediated, and even seemingly progressive form (Kaya 2014). The mainstreaming of these parties has been enabled by a dual movement: On the one hand, the broader shift of traditional European parties to the right since 9/11 to problematize Muslim immigration as a security issue led to less pronounced differences between moderate and extreme positions (Mondon and Winter 2017). In turn, the populist right has shifted to the center by wrapping its nativist agenda in "some progressive and liberal positions driven by strategic calculation to avoid social and political sanctions" (Berntzen 2019, p. 166). I will further elaborate on this dual movement in the penultimate section via comparisons with center-right and Christian-Democratic parties in these respective countries. In the core empirical section below, I demonstrate the ways in which the utilization of religious framing can facilitate the far right's self-presentation as progressive and liberal.

## 3. Core Empirical Findings

### 3.1. A Note on Methodology

The empirical material presented in this article rests on a qualitative content analysis featuring a variety of official documents. These include party programmes, manifestos for national and EU elections, websites, policy reports, declarations, as well as the discourse of their leadership published in newspapers. By definition, qualitative content analysis is descriptive; it prioritizes showcasing and exemplifying the ideas and worldviews embraced by the creators of the texts and discourses in question (Schreier 2014). It is, moreover, a method that reduces data via establishing categories and criteria for inclusion and exclusion that conform to the research objectives (Drisko and Maschi 2016). Accordingly, from a larger set of political party material available online, the documents and quotes integrated into the analysis were chosen via purposive sampling based on their pertinence, representativeness, and significance in relation to the research frame on religion, with particular focus on references to Christianity and Islam. Texts in French were translated to English by the author, while those in Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, German, and Dutch were translated via Google Translate and subsequently confirmed for accuracy with native speakers.

The selection of the eight cases, as explained in earlier sections, has been informed by the theoretical literature's identification of them to form a particular (Christianist-civilizationist) cluster within the typology of right-wing populist parties in the West. Similar parties such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) or the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), for instance, were not included, because the former does not mobilize religion as an important component of its message, and the latter has not consistently embraced a seemingly liberal stance like these eight parties (Brubaker 2017, p. 1193). The parties discussed in the analysis are therefore "typical" cases that are representative of the cluster in question (Seawright and Gerring 2008). Instead of emphasizing the differences between them via comparatively elaborating on the specific political context in each country, I prioritize a within-case approach towards this subtype to study these eight parties' religiously inflected narratives with a view to shedding light on their substance and roles, while being attentive to internal variations (Møller and Skaaning 2017). Prior to the concluding section,

I juxtapose these discourses with those of center-right and Christian-Democratic parties, which is not meant as a systematic comparison of mainstream and extremist politics, but as a heuristic strategy to provide a clearer context for the findings. The following three subsections illustrate, respectively, the narratives of Christianity as heritage, as inherently liberal and progressive, and Islam as fundamentally alien and irreconcilable.

*3.2. Christianity as National and Civilizational Heritage*

In the official documents and past/present websites of all of these populist parties, there are multiple references to Christianity as constitutive of national identity and roots, almost always placed within the larger Western/European civilization. The SVP's party programme, for instance, notes that "Switzerland is founded on Christian and Western cultural values that define our identity . . . It is no coincidence that the Swiss flag is marked with a cross and the national anthem refers to God" (SVP 2019, p. 120). Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) also writes in its programme that "Austria is part of the cultural region of Europe" and "Europe was decisively shaped by Christianity" (FPÖ 2011, p. 5). Denmark's Dansk Folkeparti (DF) highlights in its principles that "Christianity has been honoured in Denmark for centuries and is an integral part of Danish life . . . Through the ages it has been a ground stone and given guidance to the people" (DF 2002, p. 2). Norway's FrP declares in its 2017–21 programme that its foundation is based on "Norwegian and Western tradition and cultural heritage" and on a "Christian outlook on life and humanistic values" (Fremskrittspartiet 2017, pp. 8, 12).

In the neighbouring Sweden, the 2019 EU election manifesto of the SD emphasizes that "alongside the Nordic community, we also see ourselves as an obvious and natural part of European, Western community and civilization, built on the cultural heritage of . . . the Christian culture and the Enlightenment" (Sverigedemokraterna 2019, p. 3). The Vlaams Belang (VB) in Belgium, a Flemish nationalist party with a separatist platform, similarly affirms that "Christianity is one of the pillars of our European civilization, as well as among other things Greece and Rome, and the Enlightenment" (cited in Moufahim et al. 2015, p. 19). The Netherlands' Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) states in its 2010–2015 programme that it "is committed to the traditional Judeo-Christian and humanist values that have made the Netherlands the success it is today", which it proposes to make the first article of the constitution (PVV 2010, pp. 6, 35). France's Front National (FN, currently Rassemblement National, or RN), finally, reminds on a former website that "Christianity, for a millennium and a half, has been the religion of the majority of French people, if not all, and it is therefore normal that the landscapes of France and the national culture are deeply marked by it" (FN 2012).

These findings are consistent with the literature's recognition that Christianity has been increasingly present in these parties' identity-based rhetoric in the last two decades (Haynes 2020). What can also be observed is that alongside Christianity, multiple terms such as "Greco-Roman", "Western", "Enlightenment", and "Judeo-Christian" are used freely and at times interchangeably to denote a common civilization. These terms, however, remain undefined and the contradictions between them—such as the historical clashes between religion and the Enlightenment or the systematic exclusion of Jews—are obscured in favor of a homogenous narrative, where Christianity plays a central civilizational role. Such emphasis on Christianity, as the next sections will show, constitutes the first step in "emphasizing a religious divide by attacking Islam and claiming the role of defenders of the Christian . . . heritage" (Minkenberg 2018, p. 534). Establishing the religious roots allows demarcating "'original communities', who are now endangered by the advance of Islam in Europe" (Zúquete 2017, p. 107). Christianist rhetoric thus serves to determine a native, historically rooted population in differentiation from immigrants both within the nation as well as the larger civilization. What, then, is the content of this Christian identity?

### 3.3. Christianity as Inherently Secular and Progressive

Despite the adherence to Christian heritage in these parties' rhetoric, their publications reveal that such emphasis is often followed by, or provided together with, a discussion of how secularized, democratic, or liberal Christianity is. This is important to underscore: The Christianism of these parties does not simply function by avoiding references to religious belief, practice, and content, but also by consistently arguing that Christianity *itself* is a worldly and progressive religion, which helps to create a contrast with the uncivilized qualities they ascribe to Islam. Switzerland's SVP, for instance, claims that "our reason, creativity and innovation draw on our Christian and Western foundations", and "tolerance and openness are also part of the Christian heritage" (SVP 2019, p. 121). The FPÖ in Austria speaks in its programme of the "basic values" of the "European view of the world, which we describe, in a broad sense, as cultural Christianity . . . based on the separation of the church and the state" (FPÖ 2011, p. 5). The Danish DF's programme is also unequivocal about Christianity's secular nature: "Christianity sharply distinguishes between the worldly secular world and the world of faith–a distinction that is crucial for the development of a country–for freedom, openness, and democracy" (DF 2002, p. 2).

The programme of the FrP in Norway also invokes Christianity alongside secularism, viewing "the Christian cultural heritage, Western values, and the distinction between religion and politics as fundamental values in Norwegian society" (Fremskrittspartiet 2017, p. 12). A similar juxtaposition is found in the French RN's report on immigration, which advocates for "the teaching of France . . . its Christian roots *and secularism*" in schools for the assimilation of newcomers (RN 2018, p. 32, my emphasis). In religious comparisons, the VB in Belgium writes in its 2019 programme that "Islam is not a personal religion like Christianity" (VB 2019, p. 33), which is a perspective shared in an op-ed by the leader of the Swedish SD, Jimmie Åkesson: "Islam differs from Christianity in several crucial points, for example regarding the distinction between spiritual and secular power", which has allegedly caused "Islam and the Muslim world to actively reject Enlightenment and humanism" (Aftonbladet 2016). Geert Wilders, the leader of the PVV in the Netherlands, seconded these ideas, arguing that Muslim immigration "will dilute the Judeo-Christian and Humanist identities of our [European] nations", which should remain "free forever, civilized forever" (PVV 2017a). In another speech, Wilders clarified what the Judeo-Christian culture meant to his party: "It is a culture that does not kill homosexuals' and infidels, that 'allows apostasy, and treats men and women equally, and respects the separation of church and state" (cited in Kešić and Duyvendak 2019, p. 39). These statements show that beyond identifying a common heritage, Christianity is deemed valuable by these parties due to its ascribed secular qualities. While no reference is made to theological doctrine, Christianity is applauded for its tolerance, individualism, democratic nature, separation from politics and conduciveness to other progressive values that Islam is argued to lack. The next section further marks the contrast with Islam.

### 3.4. Islam as Essentially Incompatible and Dangerous

As the two previous sections elucidate, these parties embrace Christianity as a marker to separate the "people" from the "others" and assign intrinsically secular and progressive qualities to Christianity to differentiate it from the obscurantism allegedly inherent in Islam. As Mudde (2009, p. 145) observes, such discourses justify an anti-immigration stance via distinguishing "primarily upon the basis of religion, arguing that Islam is incompatible with liberal democracy or 'European civilization' and that Muslims can therefore never assimilate into the host nation". Rather than representing a fringe perspective, the anti-Islam rhetoric of these parties in fact develops within a societal-level scepticism about the assimilation capabilities of this religion. In these eight nations, the percentage of the population believing that "Islam is fundamentally incompatible with their country's culture and values" ranges between 34% and 48% (with an average of 41%), which averages 51% for Church-attending Christians (varying between 43% and 61%) (Pew Research Center 2018a, pp. 21, 66). It is thus strategically reasonable for these parties to tap into and further

provoke fears about Islam for political gain, which they actively seek to achieve with confrontational language.

The programme of the VB in Belgium, for instance, holds that the "de-Islamization of our society is only possible if policymakers dare to recognize that Islam is . . . above all an ideology that wants to replace our free society with an Islamic society based on Sharia (VB 2019, p. 33). A DF policy document on Danish cultural values iterates the same opposition: "We will not accept that people in institutions, schools, and municipalities give in to demands from immigrant parents of especially Middle Eastern descent that everything must be arranged for their sake and their religion . . . This is a battle between Danish values versus Muslim values" (DF 2007, p. 1). The Dutch PVV's 2017–21 Election brochure opens with the lines: "Millions of Dutch people are fed up with the Islamization of our country. Enough mass immigration and asylum, terror, violence and insecurity" (PVV 2017b). They expand on this idea in another party programme: "Islam is . . . a totalitarian doctrine aimed at dominance, violence, and oppression . . . It sees two categories: Muslims and Kaffirs (non-Muslims). One is superior, the other inferior. Islam strives for world domination. Jihad is the duty of every Muslim. The Quran prescribes behavior contrary to our rule of law, such as antisemitism, discrimination against women, the killing of infidels, and holy war until the world dominance of Islam is achieved" (PVV 2010, p. 13).

In a lighter yet clear tone, the Sweden's SD writes in its 2011 platform that "Islam is . . . the religious view that has proved most difficult to harmoniously coexist with Swedish and Western culture. The influence of Islamism on Swedish society should therefore be counteracted as far as possible and immigration from Muslim countries with strong elements of fundamentalism should be very severely limited" (Sverigedemokraterna 2011, p. 27). Likewise, in a report titled "Islam and the Rule of Law", the Swiss SVP argues that "when a Muslim recites the Koran, he is reciting a text, which is in some way close to our public laws . . . These contradictory conceptions of the origin of law alone indicate how difficult and almost impossible it is to achieve . . . the cohabitation of the two visions". This is why Switzerland should protect itself from Islam, because "it is not acceptable that the liberal principles of our rule of law are used as instruments of its disintegration and ultimately its destruction (SVP 2011, pp. 4, 7). The Austrian FPÖ's aptly titled policy document "Us and Islam" talks of "the problem of Muslim immigration in Europe", given that "Islam was and is not part of the Austrian or European dominant culture", and thus "a restrictive immigration policy is necessary to prevent the further spread of Islam" (FPÖ 2008, pp. 3–4).

Negative evaluations of Islam can also be found in the declarations of party leaders and members. Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French RN, despite dropping the openly racist statements that characterized her father Jean-Marie Le Pen, has not refrained from speaking abundantly against the threat of "green fascism" and notoriously comparing Muslim street prayers to the Nazi occupation of France (France 24 2015). When asked about whether Islam was compatible with the French Republic, Le Pen said yes, but only one that is "secularized by the Enlightenment" (Marianne 2016); adding elsewhere that "no solution will be found to the problems of Islamism and communitarianism without an immediate halt to mass immigration" (RN 2015). Likewise, while the leader of the Norwegian FrP, Siv Jensen, talked about "Islamisation by stealth" in Norway as an urgent problem that needs to be addressed, her fellow party member Kent Andersen wrote in a blog post that "moderate Muslims" could not actually exist, in the same way that "moderate Nazis" is a contradiction in terms (Andersen 2011). Overall, the assessment of Islam ranges from mere allusions to incompatibility to outright calls to immediate action for ensuring the survival of the nation/civilization.

## 4. Further Observations and Discussion

The official documents of these parties and the speeches of their leadership indeed paint a bleak picture about the future of their countries as well as that of Europe, construed as essentially Christian—yet secular and enlightened—dominions under threat due to

immigration from Muslim geographies. The Islamic threat is presented as a cultural and material one, incessantly assaulting progressive values alongside terrorist attacks. Sensationalized narratives interpret Muslim signs and accommodation requests as proof of an Islamic takeover, naming diverse topics such as headscarves, halal food, prayer rooms, Quran schools, minarets, circumcision, and gender-based divisions in swimming pools. The eight parties in question show variations in the extent to which they bring forth Christian heritage,[6] yet the empirical data confirms that religion is deployed first and foremost to distinguish the in-group from the out-group. To provide further examples: the Belgian VB's 2019 programme declares that "only countries that are part of the European *Christian cultural area* can participate in the EU or other European partnerships. Islamic countries cannot join the EU" (VB 2019, p. 21, my emphasis). The French RN's 2019 EU election manifesto lists Christianity among common European values and warns that "European nations must take up the great challenges to come: protect our identities to project us into the future, affirm our values of civilization in the face of Islamism" (Rassemblement National 2019, pp. 8–9).

In this framework, historical conflicts that have opposed Christians and Muslims are often brought up to emphasize the perennial character of their struggle. The Austrian FPÖ, for instance, regularly reminds voters of the Ottoman siege of Vienna to draw parallels with today, mobilizing slogans such as "Vienna must not become Istanbul" and "the sound of church bells instead of muezzin song" (cited in Hafez et al. 2019). The Swiss SVP, along with the Austrian FPÖ and the German AfD, have given new currency to the medieval German word *das Abendland* to refer to "the West" with strong connotations to Christendom, articulated as a sacred land to be protected against Muslim invasions (Forlenza 2018). In his book *Marked for Death: Islam's War against the West and Me* (Wilders 2012, p. 45), the leader of the Dutch PVV Geert Wilders pays particular attention to the past to depict Islam as an "imperialist ideology" comparable to Nazism, which has been threatening the Christian world with its "inherent brutality, as proven time and again throughout history". The shared perception in these examples that intend to speak to the collective memory is that "Muslims nowadays to try to conquer Europe as their ancestors did", which has led to the utilization of crusader symbolism and discourse in some extremist groups across the continent (Koch 2017, p. 15).

There is no apparent correlation, however, between the extent to which a party underscores Christianity and the intensity with which it condemns Islam. In the official documents of the VB in Belgium, for example, references to the Christian tradition are few and far between, while ferocious attacks on Islam as religion are abundant (VB 2019). The party programme of the FrP in Norway, by contrast, cites Christian heritage, but mentions Islam only in the context of ISIS, yet not ascribing the religion itself any essential qualities (Fremskrittspartiet 2017, p. 67). In addition to (and sometimes instead of) words, the visuals used in party websites and documents should also be noted. "A Harmonious Denmark" section of the DF's election brochure, for instance, shows a large group of Muslim men praying, and the "Immigration and Integration" section of the Norwegian FrP's website depicts veiled women; yet neither document makes any reference to Islam or Muslims (Fremskrittspartiet 2020; DF 2017). These and many other examples suggest that the parties in question deliberately create equivalence between immigration, cultural/material insecurity, and Muslims, which they reinforce with Islamic imagery to prompt anxiety. Additional images include minarets, women in burqa, bearded men, ISIS fighters, and the star and crescent (VB 2019, pp. 20, 32, 56; Fremskrittspartiet 2017, p. 60; SVP 2019, p. 122).

Besides anti-immigration, such religiously inflected divisions underpin other common policy positions such as objecting to Turkey's accession to the EU and endorsement for Israel in the Middle East, both of which are understood as halting Islamic expansion and influence (Hafez 2014). The latter policy is linked to these parties' apparent move away from their resolutely antisemitic roots to philosemitism, where Jews are now figured as part of the European civilization—characterized interchangeably as a Christian or Judeo-Christian one—inasmuch as they too are fellow victims of Islam. The literature has underscored

that the "pro-Israel and anti-antisemitic turn serves primarily as a pretext for fending off Muslim immigrants", and to "project the popular right-wing narrative of a battle between the Judeo-Christian Occident and the Muslim world" (Kahmann 2017, p. 396). Trying to distance her party from its strongly antisemitic past, Marine Le Pen's address to French Jews is indicative of this transition: "Not only is the National Front not your enemy, but it will undoubtedly be the best shield in the future to protect you against the only real enemy, Islamist fundamentalism" (Slate.fr 2016).

Similar to antisemitism, although the European far right itself has a profuse record of anti-democratic, anti-feminist, and anti-gay stances, these are currently externalized as quintessentially Muslim problems, caused by the intolerance assumed to be integral to Islam. As Akkerman (2015, p. 58) notes, however, these parties' seemingly "liberal profile is highly instrumental to an anti-Islam and anti-immigration agenda", as they rarely develop any positive projects to actually expand gender equality, gay rights, freedom of speech, or address enduring issues of antisemitism. Such themes are mostly rhetorical: they are brought up to invoke a civilizational battle between open-minded Christian-European values and immigrant-Muslim obscurantism, not as standalone projects to engender a more inclusive and pluralist society. This is why some of these parties have been referred to as the bearers of "liberal illiberalism", as they instrumentalize "selective elements of liberal discourse and ideology . . . to defend an ultimately illiberal position" (Moffitt 2017, p. 114; see also Berntzen 2019).

It should also be noted that these parties' have a predominantly conflictual relationship with Christian churches. That the Catholic Church has embraced the welcoming of refugees, for instance, was harshly criticized: Marine Le Pen told the Pope to stay out of France's internal affairs (Huffington Post 2021); the Austrian FPÖ often characterizes the Church as part of the elite establishment (Hadj-Abdou 2016). Similarly, the national churches of Sweden and Norway came under attack by the SD and the FrP, respectively, for their open attitude towards immigration—with one SD member tweeting "Shame on the Church of Sweden" for claiming that racism is an issue in the country (Nilsson 2020). In turn, many Catholic and Protestant clergy members have been outspoken in their criticism of these parties for appropriating religion for exclusionary purposes and for electoral opportunism (Reuters 2016). Further research can shed light on the diverse relationships between Christian institutions and right-wing populisms in Europe and elsewhere (see, for instance, Cremer 2021).

## 5. Comparisons with the Mainstream Right

Finally, it is worthwhile to explore these parties' religious rhetoric in relation to that of center-right and Christian-Democratic parties in their respective countries, although a comprehensive comparison is beyond the scope of the present article. For the major center-right parties, findings from secondary sources along with a series of preliminary empirical observations suggest, with variations, a symbiotic relationship. On the one hand, the religiously framed progressive aura has allowed the far right to appear less extreme and discriminatory; on the other, electoral competition with the rising power of the populists has led the center right towards tougher positions on immigration and Islam (Akkerman et al. 2016). The political impact of the far right has been more direct in some countries than in others. In certain periods in the past two decades, some of the eight parties took part in national ruling coalitions (such as the FPÖ in Austria, the SVP in Switzerland, and the FrP in Norway), joined alliances in municipal councils (such as the SD of Sweden), or closely collaborated with the government to influence policy (such as the DF in Denmark). In other countries, the mainstream's relatively more consistent application of a *cordon sanitaire*—or their professed refusal to cooperate with the populist parties—shaped the configuration of power in less direct ways (this has been the case for the RN in France, the VB in Belgium, and since 2012, the PVV in the Netherlands). Whatever the shape or form of their involvement with governmental power at regional and/or national levels, these parties have emerged as a force to reckon with for the mainstream right (as well as

left), and have consistently influenced political rhetoric and policy agendas (Wolinetz and Zaslove 2018).

The literature identifies the employment of an overt/covert nativist rhetoric as one of the foremost areas of growing convergence between far-right and center-right parties. Schwörer's (2021, pp. 197–98) mixed methods research, for instance, confirms the "populist contagion" of an anti-pluralist and "nativist Zeitgeist" in Western Europe, whereby center-right parties have been "prone to adopt nativist messages against immigration and outgroups", especially "when public opinion shifts and/or radical right parties gain success". Within this ubiquitous nativism, Muslims have stood out as the constitutive "other" that helps distinguish the core "people". Originally provoked by populists, various themes associated to the otherization of Islam—the oppression of women, ritual slaughter of animals, terrorism, censorship, homophobia, anti-Semitism, etc.—have become so widespread in political discourse that "it has rendered the distinction between what is 'mainstream' and what should be categorized as 'extreme' difficult and, at times, hopelessly muddied" (Zúquete 2017, p. 112). Writing on "illiberal" and "liberal" forms of Islamophobia, Mondon and Winter (2017, pp. 2151, 2171) have similarly observed "fuzzy borders" between "extreme articulations widely condemned in the mainstream, and normalized and insidious ones". As the eight parties studied have embraced a more "liberal" form of Islamophobia via an emphasis on pseudo-progressive values, the gap with the mainstream narrowed even more considerably.

While recognizing the general tendency of convergence is important, it would nevertheless be a mistake to conclude that mainstream and far-right parties uniformly employ the same rhetoric on the matter. A preliminary review of documents produced by the leading center-right parties in these eight countries reveals differing levels of overlap with the populists. In some cases, similarities are striking. The conservative/Christian-Democratic Austrian People's Party's 2020–24 programme, for instance, talks abundantly of the threat of Islamic extremism and terrorism, the need to inspect Islamic education books for "problematic content" such as those against "gender equality", and closely monitor Muslim personnel, schools, and ban their foreign financing (Österreichische Volkspartei 2020, pp. 27, 147, 148, 158). Les Républicains in France, the successor of the center-right/Christian-democratic tradition, use comparable language to Le Pen's RN, with a 2022 presidential election manifesto that promises to combat "Islamist barbarism" and to "eradicate Islamism" by facilitating the expulsion of Muslims and closure of mosques suspected of radicalization, because "we have to protect France from insecurity, terrorism, and mass immigration" (LR 2021, pp. 6, 18). The Danish conservative-liberal party Venstre makes few direct references to Islam itself, yet strongly problematizes the "influx" of "non-Western immigrants" as an economic and cultural burden, because they create "parallel societies" with contrasting values, particularly "in relation to gender equality and the support for our democracy and freedom of expression" (Venstre 2021).

For other parties of the mainstream right, there is a less alarmist tone regarding immigration, integration, and Muslims, although expressions that seek to reassure that their party takes these issues seriously are common. The conservative-liberal Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie in the Netherlands, for instance, underlines its commitment to religious freedoms, but clarifies that "we also do not allow people to attack Dutch democracy . . . on the basis of their religion . . . Sharia law in the Netherlands is absolutely unacceptable" (VVD 2021). The conservative New Flemish Alliance in Belgium asks the question "Is the N-VA an anti-Islam party?" and responds that "we do not mean to exclude particular ethnic groups". Yet it also boasts about being one of the few parties in Belgium to "dare to seriously talk about identity . . . and immigration" (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie 2021). The liberal-conservative Moderate Party of Sweden does not refer to Islam particularly, but critiques the center-left for being too weak on issues such as refugees, immigration, extremism, and terrorism (Moderata Samlingspartiet 2021). The Swiss center-right party FDP Liberals, while acknowledging that "demographic changes and strong immigration are of concern to the Swiss", and supported a controversial anti-terrorism law, largely

refrains from direct attacks on Islam, and stood against the burqa ban (proposed by the SVP) that passed in 2021 (FDP 2021). Høyre, the Norwegian Conservative Party, not only does not stigmatize Islam, but while in a coalition government, it also took part in the creation of an elaborate "Action Plan against Discrimination and Hatred towards Muslims", which is in stark contrast with the far right's framing (Kulturdepartementet 2020).

Unlike most of these major center-right parties (and the populists), Christian-Democratic parties that are members of the Centrist Democrat International (CDI, formerly Christian Democrat International) make more explicit and substantive references to Christian values as inspirational for their social and political vision. These parties include the Kristelig Folkeparti (Norway), Kristdemokraterna (Sweden), Kristendemokraterne (Denmark), Christen-Democratisch Appèl (the Netherlands), Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams (Belgium), and Christlichdemokratische Volkspartei der Schweiz (Switzerland).[7] On their websites and campaigns, these parties allude to Christianity to promote a variety of themes such as caring, charity, welfare, healthcare, family, and community, as well as positions on ethical questions (such as euthanasia) and protecting Christian minorities around the world. Negative evaluations of Islam or Muslims are largely avoided, yet they underline the need for sounder policy on refugees, immigration, and integration with varying degrees of intensity so as to remain competitive in that contentious policy area (KrF 2021; KD 2021a, 2021b; CDA 2021; CD&V 2021; CVP 2021). All in all, preliminary comparisons with major center-right and Christian-Democratic parties in these eight countries expose a variegated picture on the extent to which far-right discourses are incorporated by the mainstream. While the literature accurately recognizes an overall shift towards the right in the last two decades, it should be acknowledged that some center-right parties more directly provoke suspicion towards Islam than others. Smaller Christian-Democratic parties, on their part, tend to be less provocative on the Muslim question, and rather than mere references to religious heritage, their discourse diverges from the populist right in more consistently embracing Christian content to guide their policies.

## 6. Conclusions

While the eight populist parties studied in this article have been recognized as forming a Christianist-civilizationist cluster within the typology of right-wing politics in the West, an in-depth and equal-weighted investigation of their rhetoric via primary sources has been thus far missing from the literature. This article sought to address that gap by compiling official party documents and various declarations in multiple languages to analyze the features, relevance, and purposes of religious framing for the parties in question. The empirical data offers novel material to further our understanding of the strategic incorporation of Christianity by these parties. Beyond a patrimonial and identitarian asset with no meaningful theological content, the Christianism of these parties also rests on the systematic framing of Christianity *itself* as secular and progressive by nature, which is a rhetorical construct that serves to intensify the contrast with Islam. Comparisons with traditional conservative parties, moreover, reveal evidence to suggest that although mainstream politics has at least partially incorporated similar nativist formulas, noteworthy differences remain between major center-right parties across countries, while Christian-Democratic parties are inclined to be less demagogic on Islam and more engaged with Christian doctrine and teachings. The preliminary findings presented here can provide context for further comparative and case studies on the particular ways the mainstream and the far right mobilize religion.

What are some larger theoretical inferences that can be drawn from the analysis of the far-right parties' discourses for the literature on populism, religion, and immigration? Four conclusions follow, which speak respectively to the relationship between religion and migration, the specific articulation of Christianity by these parties, the general state of secularization in Europe, and the purposes that religiously fashioned discourses serve for populist politics. The first conclusion is about the reciprocal relationship between religion and migration. The religious framing of minorities of various backgrounds into

a single category of "Muslims" has facilitated the drawing of civilizational boundaries between Europe and its outsiders to fuel anti-immigration sentiments and policy agendas. In turn, constant stigmatization has changed the religious identities and experiences of Europe's Muslim-origin ethnic communities, as various studies have shown (Heelsum and Koomen 2016; Diehl and Schnell 2006). Yet migration's impact on religious identities can be significant not only for migrant groups, but also for those in host societies. The scholarship on the religion–migration nexus focuses more often on the religious experience and belonging of migrants, while religious changes occurring in receiving societies—especially as a direct or indirect outcome of immigration—also merit closer examination. The increasing deployment of a religiously inflected language by the populist right in these eight highly secularized European countries presents a clear, albeit unpleasant, example of how religious identities in majority groups may be transformed in close affiliation with newcomers. Although immigration is not the sole factor for the far right's reclaiming of Christianity, the fact that they articulate religion almost exclusively as a way to buttress the nativist and populist distinction between the "people" and the "others" suggests that immigration might have had a significant effect. There is, therefore, evidence corroborating the "reactive Christianity" perspective, expressed simultaneously in national and civilizational terms (Brubaker 2016, 2017).

A second and related conclusion is about the very nature of that identity that relates to Christianity. These parties' documents and their leaders' declarations confirm that unlike their Christian-Democratic opponents, meaningful references to Christian belief, doctrine, practice, theology, or values are marked by their sheer absence. The affective cultural resources that religion could theoretically offer to populists (as discussed in Arato and Cohen 2017; Zúquete 2007) do not seem to be employed in any explicit way. If one were to argue that these parties' religiously colored discourse enables sacralizing the "people" as chosen or inspiring a mission of salvation against the Islamic threat, one would have to acknowledge that this is extremely implicit—with only vague use of symbolism and language that is mostly absent of Christian content. While religion is abundantly used for inter-group differentiation (Tajfel 1978) and for reinforcing symbolic boundaries (Bail 2008), the political theology of these populist parties manifests itself in mostly covert ways, if at all, with remarkably weak links to Christianity. Instead, as the empirical sections showed, the parties in question make a point of construing Christianity as *intrinsically secular, liberal, and democratic* so that they can contrast it with the unenlightened qualities attributed to Muslim immigrants. As Joppke (2018, p. 238) sums up, "Christianism in the hands of extreme right parties is simply a club to beat Islam".

Third, the reluctance to politically mobilize substantive Christian content is likely linked to the reality that such rhetoric would not resonate well in these highly secularized societies. The previously discussed religious demographic change in Europe, especially the rapid growth of Islam, did not lead to a rediscovered interest in Christian-conservative social values that have been systematically abandoned since the 1960s. There is no data to suggest a Christian resurgence in Europe; what is on the rise is not religion qua religion, but what social scientists have called religion as tradition (Riesebrodt 2010), as heritage (Lehmann 2013), cultural religion (Demerath 2000), or ethnic religion (Hervieu-Léger 2006) (for a review of these family of concepts, see Astor and Mayrl 2020). This phenomenon is not only limited to Western and Northern Europe; it has also been observed in post-socialist Eastern Europe, including East Germany and Russia (Köllner 2020). Right-wing populist parties are arguably contributing to the transformation of Christianity as religion into an ethnocultural marker against immigrants. Related policy efforts to curb Islam's visibility, moreover, have engendered an even more comprehensive secularization of the European public sphere. It has been argued that the recent series of legislation and court decisions on issues such as religious signs, clerical immunity, ritual slaughter, circumcision, and blasphemy have weakened all religions' socio-legal significance and presence (Roy 2019, pp. 126–50). In short, Muslim immigration is producing the contradictory outcome of

revitalizing culturally Christian identities in a context where Europe continues to become more secular.

Fourth and lastly, the purposes that religiously inflected discourses serve for right-wing populist parties need highlighting. In the framework of new racism (Tagueiff 1990; Barker 1981), religion offers a more acceptable form of boundary-making against non-white immigrants via the invoking of uniquely cultural distinctions and hierarchies that insist on "European superiority" in different terms (Duina and Carson 2020). The empirical data attests that these parties more frequently target Islam as religion/ideology/doctrine rather than Muslims in particular, which facilitates framing the issue as an abstract cultural clash rather than in the form of unconcealed hate speech. The 'cultural turn' thus allows these parties to dissociate themselves from their openly racist forerunners and move from the fringes of the political spectrum towards the mainstream, as seen in their bourgeoning electoral popularity. The available data supports the hypothesis that the juxtaposition of Christian-European civilizational values with Islamic dogmatism contributes to the 'normalization' of the far right by giving its nativist, xenophobic cause a liberal, progressive, and enlightened aura. As right-wing parties 'find religion', therefore, anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalist positions are becoming more palatable and widespread.

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## Notes

[1]  Right-wing populists in the US, Poland, and Hungary embrace Christianity with relatively stronger reference to faith and doctrine, and as a key asset to mobilize socially conservative groups and policies. Their discursive emphasis on liberal values is highly limited, if not inexistent, and they are more strictly nationalist in their rhetoric rather than invoking broader civilizational values (see Peker and Laxer 2021 for a comparative framework, and Stewart 2020 on far-right civilizationism).

[2]  Formerly Vlaams Blok, founded in 1978.

[3]  Formerly Front national, name changed in 2018.

[4]  The ideational perspective features scholars who view populism primarily as a "thin-centered" ideology (Mudde 2009) or a discourse (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016). The latter group is inspired by the work of Ernesto Laclau, and shares commonalities with the political style approach. Moffitt (2020), for instance, merges the two into what he calls the "discursive-performative approach" (for a discussion, see Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2019, pp. 4–5).

[5]  The various authors cited in this section do not necessarily agree on the meaning and the distinguishing qualities of populism, yet their works have overlapping and complementary elements that conform to the ideational approach as operationalized in this article. Such convergence corresponds to the recent appraisals of the literature, which observe that "the style, discursive, and thin-ideology approaches constitute a family . . . [T]he distinctions lose much of their significance during the analysis of cases" (Tuğal 2021, p. 332), because "some basic agreement now exists on populism's rhetorical character" (Urbinati 2019, p. 113).

[6]  The differences of emphasis concerning Christian heritage are also reflected in these parties' views on institutional arrangements. The DF, for example, favours maintaining the established Danish national church, while the French RN brands itself as the only party protecting the Law of 1905 that separated the church and state.

[7]  The six Christian-Democratic parties listed here have generally had less electoral success in the last decade compared to the mainstream right. The Austrian People's Party is not affiliated to the CDI, and while Les Républicains in France is, it differs from these parties as it lacks the same emphasis on Christian values.

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