Religion and the Populist Radical Right

Secular Christianism and Populism in Western Europe

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Foreword

Scholarship on Populism, Populism in Scholarship

It was quite an encounter—nay, an interface! In India, encounter means staged killing by the state of the alleged criminals.

She was my co-traveler on a Europe-bound flight from Melbourne to Dubai. Her destination was London; mine New York. This was one of the several long flights I had gotten used to during the decade-long life I began as a teacher-scholar in Australia's universities in 2009. To join the conversation she had begun, when I asked where she was heading to, tersely she said: "home." So, London was her home! In her 60s at the time of our interface, the parents of my neighbor on the flight had moved to Australia from England when she was a kid. Having been brought up, educated and worked in Australia, she still did not consider Australia her home. In fact, so enchanted was she by the "British culture" that she rarely found anything positive about Australia. If there was anything positive, it was bequeathed by and shipped from England and Europe. The self-perception of my co-traveler chimed in with Pauline Hanson's, leader of One Nation Party. She was known for her trite tutorials—shared across the inconsequential divide between "liberal" and "labor" parties—to non-white Asian "immigrants," including Muslims in particular, to assimilate into Australian "culture." Faced with a temporary electoral setback in 2010, Hanson, however, planned to say "goodbye forever" to Australia for her "original home," the UK.[1]

The degree to which I know Australia, "the tyranny of distance"—a phrase used by historian Geoffrey Blainey—is constitutive of its white culture, lamenting as it does the distance between Australia and its cultural mother, Britain. Notably, for Blainey, Australia was an "image of Britain and an outpost of Europe," which was "the source," *inter alia*, of "institutions and ideas" in Australia.[2] Due precisely to this distance, there historically has been proximity between Australia and the West to the extent that Australian academia has little thinking autonomous from the West. Surely, there are exceptions like the late

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[1] *BBC*, "Australia Race Politician Pauline Hanson Moving to UK." 15 February (2010).

[2] Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1966), at 328, viii.

anthropologist-historian Patrick Wolfe, an original thinker with a conscience (this word seems almost abusive in corporatized academy). In my reading, Blainey's tyranny of distance is equally the tyranny of dependence manifest in the kinds of questions pursued in intellectual inquiry in Australia.

Dr. Nicholas Morieson's *Religion and Populist Right: Secular Christianism and Populism in Western Europe* boldly departs from Blainey-like formulations. Instead of tracking the obvious influence of Europe on its outpost, Australia—a view non-identically expressed by my co-traveler, Hanson and many others—as a young Australian scholar, he sets out to examine ideas and politics in the very "heartland" or "home": Europe. To this end, Morieson asks a highly productive, timely and probing question. The salience of this question goes deep into the very crisis in contemporary democracy as a project, not only in the West but worldwide. Aptly conceived and pithily phrased, Morieson asks: given that Western Europe's populist radical right political parties "are secular," why are they so preoccupied with and devoted to proclaiming and defending what they characterize as "Christian or Judeo-Christian" identity and value? In the course of first asking and then addressing this question, Morieson synthetically and creatively draws on diverse traditions of thinking beyond his own disciplinary training in politics and International Relations: namely, anthropology, history, religion, sociology, area studies and evanescently also on philosophy, especially the select writings by Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor. A strand of literature that in particular relates to the book's methodology, utilizing as it does Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), defies neat disciplinary classification. The book thus shows the remarkable dexterity with which the author demonstrates his ability to deploy multiple scholarly literatures and weave them together in order to formulate and conduct his investigation.

While framing it more broadly in relation to Europe in general, including the UK, Morieson zooms in on France and the Netherlands as in-depth case studies to frontally address this question. He justifies his choice noting both differences and similarities between the two nation-states, which are part of the European Union (EU), the former (along with Germany) as one of the key drivers of EU. The two, respectively female and male, radical populist leaders with evident hostility to Islam who constitute as prominent figures in his text are: Geert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV) in the Netherlands and Marine Le Pen, leader of National Front (FN) in France. Le Pen is the daughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who earlier led FN for over three decades. Later named National Rally, FN, unlike PVV, had historical connections with "fascist and integralist movements." The similarity between Wilders and Le Pen pertained to their projections of Islam and Europe as polar opposites and hence their routine tutorials to Muslims to work for an impossibility: to

assimilate themselves to European-Western values.[3] With a careful contextualization of their biographies and politics and appropriately deploying the tool of CDA, the book analyzes many significant speeches and writings by Wilders and Marine Le Pen. Analytically, the renewed entanglement between religion and politics in Western Europe thus forms the main problématique of the book.

To some readers who may expect this foreword to furnish a quick summary of the book's principal contention, let me say that I have no intention to spoil their own joyful journey through reading it. The author writes with admirable clarity. Finely structured as the book is, its prose flows with much ease and fluency.

As the book particularly names Habermas (along with Rogers Brubaker) as the main theoretical source for the argument it makes, through a brief exposition on his philosophy, here I want to flag a point that any critical discussion on populism ought to address. Is it possible for scholars to be quarantined or maintain an objective distance from the phenomena which they examine? Put differently, do analysts (of populism) and the analyzed stand separated from each other? Notably, if populism is a genre of nationalism and democracy, — which it is in Jan-Werner Mueller's formulation[4] — then, rather than fully stand apart from it, Habermas to a considerable degree is part thereof. Consider his 2003 text, at once an analysis and an "appeal," on the mass demonstrations against the US-engineered imperialist invasion of Iraq.[5]

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[3] Elsewhere I have discussed how such tutorials in "advanced" democracies of Western nation-states to immigrants in general and Muslims in particular are also historical echoes of colonists — British, Dutch, French and so on — who pursued a policy of separation, physical as much as cultural, from the colonized "natives" in Asia, Africa and elsewhere. See, Irfan Ahmad, "In Defense of Ho(s)tels: Islamophobia, Domophilia, Liberalism," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 14, 2 (2013): 234-252.

[4] Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

[5] Though signed by both Habermas and Derrida, the text is written primarily by the former. See editorial note in Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, "February 15, or What Binds Europeans Together: A Plea for a Common Foreign Policy, Beginning in the Core of Europe [translated by Max Pensky]," *Constellation* 10, 3 (2003): 291- 297, at 291. My quote in the paragraph ahead is from this source, at 293.
This is the English translation of the original article in German published in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 31 May 2003. Because of the substantive differences on many issues between them, it is appropriate to treat this text more as Habermasian than Derridian; on which, see, Ross Benjamin and Heesok Chang, "Jacques Derrida, The Last European," *SubStance* 35, 2(2006): 140-171, at 141.

To counter "the hegemonic unilateralism of the United States," Habermas proposed a common European policy based on a historical as well as futuristic European identity. To the existing and future constituent nation-states of the EU, Habermas advised adding a "European dimension" to their "national identities." The core of this European identity, Habermas maintains, is the distinct "form of spirit" "rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition." The use of the hyphenated term "Judeo-Christian tradition" is arresting. As a term, "Judeo-Christian" is a post-WW-II American coinage and thus absent in the pre-Holocaust European vocabulary.[6] Without informing his readers about the term's radical novelty, Habermas notes that democracy, individualism, rationalism, equality and so on bequeathed by this tradition later spread to the United States, Canada and Australia, which, to recall Blainey, is an outpost of Europe. So permeated throughout with Eurocentrism was Habermas' appeal that he felt impelled to say, in his final sentence, that he rejected Eurocentrism. In a sharp and one of the earliest critiques, the late American feminist political theorist Iris Young, however, rightly noted how the philosopher's appeal amounted to a re-centering of Europe and far removed from any notion of an inclusive global democracy. Tellingly, she dubbed Habermas' posturing of European identity against the US as "little more than sibling rivalry." More importantly, Young pointed out how the appeal to fashion and nurture "a particularist European identity" entailed designing new "others," indeed continually constructing and setting "insiders" against "outsiders."[7] Young also correctly identified the erasure of demonstrations outside Europe because Habermas highlighted only those within Europe to signal "the birth of a European public sphere." In many important ways, some key elements of the template of European identity furnished and appealed for by Habermas (and critically broached by Young) resonate with the facets of the discourses passionately pursued by Wilders and Le Pen. More importantly, if the traditions and values of the people against whom the imperialist war was waged and on whose behalf he seemed to speak stand invisiblized in Habermas' "cosmopolitan" text, in discourses by Wilders and Le Penn Islam and Muslims stand stigmatized and as the quintessential obverse of national Dutch, French or a pan European "Judeo-Christian" identity. The path from invisibilization through stigmatization to violence is often short. To readers who may take my position as one that renders Habermas, Wilders and Le Pen as siblings, let me

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[6] David Sorkin, "Religious Minorities and Citizenship in the Long Nineteenth Century: Some Contexts of Jewish Emancipation," in *Politics of Religious Freedom*, edited by Winnifred Sullivan, Elizabeth Hurd, Saba Mahmood, and Peter Danchin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015): 115-126, at 121-22.

[7] Iris Young, "Europe and the Global South: Towards a Circle of Equality," *Open Democracy* 19 August (2003).

clarify that such is not my aim. At the same time, any fair assessment should not and cannot ignore the shared ground among the three individuals who otherwise are often seen as chalk and cheese. They are not.

It is no coincidence that in fervently calling for fashioning a European identity to actualize a European foreign policy, Habermas took resort to Immanuel Kant as the fundamental source for his hope for the globe. Though separated by over two centuries at their births, Habermas and Kant appear as philosophers in arms. Like the ethnic character of Habermas' philosophizing, that of Kant was manifest, *inter alia*, in the vehement stigmatization of Islam and Muslims as conceptual opposite of his own philosophy informed by an assumed rational Protestant postulate.[8] And unlike Blainey's tyranny of distance, what marked Kant's writings about Turks and Muslims—as it does Habermas' too, albeit in a markedly different way—is the tyranny of proximity. Muslims are so close, yet so distant, conceptually more than spatially!

Such is the dialectic of distance and proximity!

The aim of this digression, if that is the apt word, to Habermas and Kant is only to underscore the value of Morieson's work as it meticulously prepares the necessary ground to modify, expand, and critically enrich our understandings of populism in general and of European populist politics in particular. Future interventions on populism in Western Europe by scholars — not to skirt out the probability of one by Dr. Morieson himself as a sequel to his current book — will gainfully proceed by marking the productive force of its principal research question and the wide-ranging significance of the contribution *Religion and Populist Right* makes.

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[8] For an elaborate treatment of ethnic nature of philosophizing by Kant (including of the French Enlightenment), pursued through the frame of an anthropology of philosophy, see, Irfan Ahmad, *Religion as Critique: Islamic Critical Thinking from Mecca to the Marketplace* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), chapter II.

Preface

I began writing my PhD thesis – upon which this book is based – during the explosion of right-wing populism in Europe which perhaps culminated in Brexit, and the rise of a number of populist radical right parties throughout the region, including the National Front in France, the Alternative for Germany, and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands. What caught my interest at the time was not only the rise of the phenomenon of right-wing populism itself, but rather the curious blending of politics and religion – which seemed uncharacteristic of secular European politics – common to right-wing populists in Western Europe. It seemed strange to me that so little literature describing and attempting to understand the relationship between right-wing populism and religion in Western Europe had been published. This book attempts to fill this gap in the literature by examining the role of religion in the discourse of Western Europe's populist radical right parties.

The book begins with the observation that a number of Western European populist radical right parties are calling for a return to Christian and/or Judeo-Christian values, and for the Christian and/or Judeo-Christian identity of their respective nations to be respected and preserved. Muslims, in particular, are singled out by the populist radical right as a threat to Western Christian values and identity. Yet these populist radical right parties do not appear to be advocates of a religious doctrine or way of life; rather, they most often frame themselves as defenders of secularism. This is curious: if populist radical right parties in Western Europe are secular, why then has Christian or Judeo-Christian identity become such an important aspect of their discourse? It is this question that this book attempts to answer.

During my time researching this book, I received much help and advice from a number of people I wish to thank. First and foremost, I wish to first thank my PhD supervisors, Associate Professor Mark Chou and Dr Benjamin Moffitt, for their crucial advice and guidance. I wish also to thank Dr Dina Afrianty and Professor Irfan Ahmad, who supervised my work earlier in my candidacy. The advice provided by Dr Erin Wilson, Dr Luca Mavelli, Professor José Casanova, and Professor Jack Barbalet proved to be vital to this project, and for this, I thank them. I also wish to thank Professor John Rees, Dr Joshua Roose, Professor Bryan Turner, and my friends and colleagues at Australian Catholic University, and – for her unfailing support and understanding throughout my candidacy – Christine Lan.

Introduction

Has religion returned to Western European politics?[1] Throughout a number of European nations populist radical right politicians are calling for a return to Christian or Judeo-Christian values, and for the Christian identity of their respective nations to be respected and preserved.[2] Muslims are increasingly demonized and called a threat to Western Christian values and identity.[3] And populist radical right parties are, increasingly, winning a greater share of the vote while spreading this message.

At first, it may appear the rise of the populist radical right indicates that, after decades of secularisation, Western Europeans are returning to the religion of their parents and grandparents. Yet this does not appear to be occurring. There are no indications that Europeans are becoming more religious. Fewer and fewer Western Europeans are attending church, and disbelief in the Christian God and traditional Christian sexual morality is growing year by year. Western Europeans, rather, appear to be increasingly irreligious.[4] Moreover, the parties of the Western European populist radical right do not tell their supporters to go to church, believe in God, or practice traditional Christian values. Instead, they do something rather strange: they claim that their respective national identities and cultures are the product of a Christian or Judeo-Christian tradition which either encompasses – or has produced – secularism.

For example, in an interview conducted by Cecile Alduy, French National Front leader Marine Le Pen remarked upon the challenge posed to French

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[1] This book contains materials previous published in Nicholas Morieson, "Are contemporary populist movements hijacking religion?" *Journal of Religious and Political Practice*, 3(1-2), 2017, pp.88-95.

[2] Nadia Marzouki and Duncan McDonnell, "Populism and Religion", in *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion,* C. Hurst and Co: London, 2016, 8.

[3] Ibid., 5-6.

[4] A Pew survey indicates that Europeans are remarkably irreligious. See "How Religious commitment varies by country among people of all ages", *Pew Research Centre,* June 13, 2018. Last accessed 3 February, 2021. http://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/13/how-religious-commitment-varies-by-country-among-people-of-all-ages/. Church attendance remains very low in most Western European countries. See "Being Christian in Western Europe", *Pew Research Centre,* May 29, 2018. Last accessed 3 February, 2021. http://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/.

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