12
RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND RELIGION IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Damaging events characterized as the results of “Islamist terrorism” have taken place in many European countries in recent years (Kaya and Tecmen, 2019). As a result, it is now fashionable to “talk of a ‘clash of civilizations’ between the West and Islam” (Waever, 2006). For many, this suggests that the West is engaged in an “intercivilizational” conflict with Islamist violent extremists and terrorists. The conflict, which may have begun with the Iranian revolution of 1979, was exacerbated by the egregious events of 11 September 2001 (hereafter, 9/11), and since then, it has gathered pace. Waever (2006) argues that, as a result, “the world” is “standing on the brink of a long conflict, perhaps a new ‘cold war’ that features small-scale, but spectacular violence”, involving the “West” and “Islam”. Concern with escalating intercivilizational conflict encouraged electoral support for right-wing populists in both Europe and the USA (Brubaker, 2017a, 2017b; Conférence du 6 March, 2017; Joppke, 2018; Haynes, 2019a, 2021). A key characteristic of right-wing populism is that representative politicians and supportive voices in the media highlight what they see as the cultural impact of immigration, leading to intercivilizational conflict. Beyond political exploitation of fears of large-scale immigration, right-wing populist parties also have two further traits. First, they seek to win political power via “personalistic leadership that feeds on quasi-direct links to a loosely organized mass of heterogenous followers” (Weyland, 2013, p. 20). Second, their political appeals are based on a “thin” ideology that “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’”.

(Mudde, 2007, p. 23)

Right-wing populist politicians have recently enjoyed electoral success not only in the USA with the presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2021) but also contemporaneously in several European countries. Strategies and electoral platforms are not however identical, as what occurs in individual countries is affected by “nationally specific factors such as political history, system and culture” (Greven, 2016). Having said that, right-wing populists do have generic ideological similarities, which inform their political messages, platforms, and programs. First, the main
target of populism, both left-wing and right-wing varieties, is a (supposedly corrupt) elite political class from which the mass of the ordinary people needs defending, and the populist politician depicts him- or herself as a “genuine” popular voice in opposition to the corrupt power holders. Second, right-wing populists claim to champion the rights and legitimacy of the indigenous “ordinary people” against the “immigrant-loving”, self-serving elites in politics and business. The latter in particular are said to be keen to see mass immigration for their own economic reasons: to flood the jobs market with myriads of people from different cultures able and willing to work for relatively low wages and thus undercut indigenous workers’ wage levels. According to Huntington (2004, p. 268), “these transnationals have little need for national loyalty, view national boundaries as obstacles that thankfully are vanishing, and see national governments as residues from the past whose only function now is to facilitate the elite’s global operations”. Third, right-wing populists in the USA and Europe routinely vilify Islam as a faith and Muslims as a community, in ways reminiscent of the lack of support for Jewish refu-
gees in the late 1930s and early 1940s in the USA and many European countries (Friedman, 1973; García, 2018). Fourth, right-wing populists typically seek to identify Islam as a faith and Muslims as a group as a fundamental “civilizational” threat to historically and culturally defined “Christian” or “post-Christian” nations of the USA and Europe, which challenges them culturally, religiously, civilizationaly, socially, and politically. Finally, right-wing, anti-immigration, populist politicians have achieved enhanced electoral support in many European countries by exploiting real or imagined societal fears of a “Muslim invasion”, a concern stimulated by the Arab uprisings of 2011 and the continuing Syrian civil war (Brubaker, 2017a; Haynes, 2016; Kaya and Tecmen, 2019; Kratochvíl, 2019; Ozzano, 2019).

Right-wing, anti-immigration, populist politicians have recently won either power or a significantly increased share of the vote, albeit without achieving power, in the USA and several European countries, including the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia, and Sweden (Brubaker, 2017a, 2017b; Haynes, 2019a, 2021; Joppke, 2018; Kaya and Tecmen, 2019). In the USA, a turn to right-wing populism was emphatically demonstrated by Donald Trump’s presidency. During the 2016 and 2021 election campaigns and on achieving power in January 2017, Trump expressed frequent anti-Muslim feelings, enacting policies to prevent Muslims from certain countries entering the USA because of the threat they supposedly posed (Mandaville, 2017; Subtirelu, 2017). In addition, Trump and several other Republican candidates openly questioned the loyalties of the three million or more American Muslims (Mandaville, 2017). In his nativist appeals, Trump also targeted illegal immigration into the USA from Mexico and Central America. The issue centred on whether ethnically or religiously different people – that is, Mexicans and Muslims – can be fully trusted in America by nativist Americans. Do they demonstrate “sufficient” and “acceptable” levels of loyalty, commitment, and identity to the USA, a country scarred by – and scared of – terrorism, especially since 9/11 (Crandall et al., 2018)? During his presidency, Trump made much political capital by stressing he would stop migration from Mexico into the USA, by building a “big, beautiful” wall on America’s southern border and compel the government of Mexico to pay for it. The aim was to curtail dramatically illegal emigration from Mexico (Haynes, 2016, 2019b).

Before proceeding, here are a few words about methodology. Research for this chapter draws on relevant interviews, policy speeches, statements, remarks, and press conferences. In addition, where appropriate, it draws on primary source data, including policy documents and legislation. The research was informed by scholarly and journalistic critiques of and commentary on such right-wing populists’ rhetoric and policy in relation to Islam and Muslims. The overall methodological aim is to employ appropriate sources in order to present a range
of views regarding the rhetoric and policies of right-wing populists in the USA and Europe vis-à-vis Islam and Muslims.

The chapter is in three sections: (1) Christian Civilizationism in the USA and Europe: Provenance and Practice, which identifies and explains the issue to be looked at in this chapter, (2) Right-Wing Populism and Christian Civilizationism in the USA, and (3) Right-Wing Populism and Christian Civilizationism in Western Europe. Each section identifies and examines an aspect of the research question. The first looks at the theoretical and analytical underpinnings of Christian civilizationism. The following case study sections examine how and why Christian civilizationism is employed by right-wing populists in the USA and Western Europe. We examine what they have in common and where they differ and explain that both international and domestic factors are significant in identifying the rhetoric and claims of right-wing populists.4

**Christian civilizationism in the USA and Europe: provenance and practice**

“Christianism” (or “Christian civilizationism”) is an ideology which trumpets the perceived superiority of “Christian values”; it is an essential building-block of right-wing populists’ political rhetoric and appeal in both Europe and the USA. A blogger, Sullivan (2013), is widely credited with coining the term in 2003. Sullivan defines “Christianism” as a “partisan ideology wrapped in a veneer of Christianity”. Sullivan explained that it is adopted in the USA by “those on the fringes of the religious right who have used the Gospels to perpetuate their own aspirations for power, control and oppression”. Sullivan averred that Christians were “as anathema to true Christians as the Islamists are to true Islam”. Another blogger, Jethani (2016), commented that what Sullivan identified as a fringe minority nearly two decades ago now seems to “be rapidly expanding to the point of becoming tolerated as mainstream”. Jethani recognized this in the November 2016 election of Donald Trump, a massively popular choice for president of most right-wing Christian evangelicals.5 This was hardly likely to be because Trump’s “character, story, agenda, or candidacy . . . finds alignment with Scripture, the cross, the gospel, or personal/social transformation (Bebbington’s evangelical markers in simple terms). However, his ‘Make America Great Again’ slogan, along with his maligning of women, immigrants, and all ‘losers’ while triumphantly holding up a Bible, fits Christianism perfectly” (Jethani, 2016).6 More generally, recent years have seen right-wing populist politicians in both the USA and Europe take “Christianity” as a defining feature of national purity. However, as “with the idea of Islamism this has little, if any, theological depth to it, but it is the application of Christianity to a political ideology, one that establishes the pure people against outsiders” (Ryan, 2018).

In the USA, Christian civilizationism draws inspiration from and has foundations in what are purported to be “Judeo-Christian” values (Haynes, 2017). That is, the ideology of Christian civilizationism is rooted in a belief that, culturally, socially, and politically, US principles and achievements stem from the country’s claimed Judeo-Christian values.7 This view has been politically weaponized in recent years, with several cultural groups, especially “Mexicans” and “Muslims”, being vilified for not apparently having such values. For example, former Republican congressman Steve King called immigrants “dogs” and “dirt”; and Donald Trump “infamously declared that most immigrants crossing the southern border were ‘rapists and criminals’ and pledged to ban all Muslims from entering the US” (Siddiqui, 2019).

In 2016 and 2020, Trump’s electoral appeal was in part based upon his claim that not only “Mexicans” but also “Islam” and “Muslims” pose an existential threat to America and its
civilization. For figures such as Trump and King, Islam is a cultural, ideational, and emerging existential challenge to the USA that must be defeated in order to ensure the purity of American culture. It requires policies both to limit the numbers of Muslims in the USA and to prevent the spread of sharia law, allegedly spearheaded by American representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood (Beydoun, 2018, pp. 105–109).

In Western Europe, the political ideology of Christian civilizationism draws extensively on a claimed contrast between “liberal” and “illiberal” values. The former is exemplified by, for example, French civilizational values. France’s president, Emmanuel Macron, suggested in July 2017 that Africa’s problems are civilizationally rooted, a mix of security, social, and political issues. Macron claimed that Africa’s “problems . . . are completely different” to those of Europe, as they are “civilizational” and include “[f]ailed states, complex democratic transitions and extremely difficult demographic transitions . . . Islamist terrorism, drugs and weapons trafficking” (Dearden, 2017). Macron’s depiction of Africa highlights what he sees as the region’s lack of “European-ness”, that is, insufficient modernization. According to Huntington (1996, p. 68), “[m]odernization involves industrialization, urbanization, increasing levels of literacy, education, wealth, and social mobilization, and more complex and diversified occupational structures. The qualities that make a society Western, in contrast, are special: the classical legacy, Christianity, the separation of church and state, the rule of law, civil society” (emphasis added). For Huntington, being “modern” and being “Western” are different. That is, “modernity” has generic qualities – including industrialization, urbanization, and higher levels of literacy, education, and wealth. Being “Western”, on the other hand, implies adhesion to a particularist civilization (“the classical legacy”) and religion (“Christianity”), with foundations in ubiquitous political and social institutions (that is, church-state separation, “the rule of law”, and independent civil societies). According to Macron, some non-Western civilizations, such as those in Africa, lack these attributes. Instead, the region is replete with “failed states”, a lack of democracy, widespread Islamist terrorism, and extensive criminality. Macron sees these as the inescapable cultural and civilizational differences characterizing the West and Africa, respectively, which explains the relative political, economic, and social stability and security of the former compared to the latter. The notion of irreducible cultural differences between the West and non-West is a key claim of Christian civilizationism in both Europe and the USA, facilitating the targeting Muslims and other non-Christians, such as Jews, as the undesirable other.

Right-wing populism and Christian civilizationism in the USA

This section examines the employment of Christian civilizationism by Donald Trump during his presidency. Many Americans view Islam and Muslims as undifferentiatedly linked to the violent events of 9/11 (Kamali, 2015). Trump was able to exploit fears of “Islamic terrorism” both to push for a “Muslim ban” and to highlight the alleged superiority of “Judeo-Christian” beliefs and values. Use of Christian civilizationism by Trump during his presidential campaign and his presidency highlights that to him Islam and Muslims were a key source of America’s recent travails, exemplified by 9/11. Overall, Trump’s Christian civilizationism sought to underline what he claimed needed to be done to “Make America Great Again”: build on the foundations of America as a “Christian nation” by excluding those of different religious and cultural persuasions.

Quoting the Austrian author Kurt Seinitz, Kamali (2015, p. 204) notes that for all the talk of globalization bringing increased diversity, many Westerners, including Americans, continue to demonstrate a widespread lack of basic knowledge about Islam. That deficiency is compounded in the USA, as elsewhere in the West, by social secularization and accompanying the death of
religious taboos, which serves to decrease interest in and empathy with non-Western religions. This helps explain how right-wing populist politicians in the USA and other Western countries are successful electorally by pointing to a perceived or imagined existential threat from “Islam” and Muslims, especially “radical Islamic terrorism”, to justify draconian, anti-Muslim policies in the interests of “security”. Examples of such a policy include President Trump’s Executive Order 13780, upheld by the Supreme Court in June 2018, which barred from entry into the USA people from five mainly Muslim countries from which no one has been convicted of terrorism (Adida et al., 2016).8

Brubaker (2017a) argues that right-wing populists in both the USA and Europe have a “Christian civilizationist” worldview. This views “Islam” as the main threat to the indigenous society’s “civilizational integrity”. The proposed remedy is to counter the perceived threat to national integrity by use of a novel ideology – “Christianism”, a self-conscious counterpoint to “Islamism”. Christianism is characterized by overt, often extreme, anti-Islamism. It can include apparently liberal views on issues of gender and sexuality. They are used to seek to distinguish “enlightened”, secularized European civilization from allegedly regressive and repressive Islamic culture. This approach was adopted successfully by several prominent Dutch politicians, including the assassinated Pim Fortuyn, his ideological successor, Gert Wilders, and French President Nicholas Sarkozy, during 2007–2012. According to DeHanas and Shterin (2018, p. 178), the “same dynamics of Christian civilizationism are mirrored in many cases throughout Europe and in the U.S.”

The recent political salience of Christianism is both manifested and exemplified by former US president Donald Trump’s words and deeds. The Trump presidency both stimulated and encouraged Trump “wannabes” around the world, not only in Europe, such as Viktor Orbán in Hungary, but also elsewhere in the world, including Narendra Modi, prime minister of India; Brazil’s president, Jair Bolsonaro; and the former prime minister of the UK, Boris Johnson (Whitehead et al., 2018). Ideological links between such leaders bring together a group of like-minded, values-based, nationalist politicians, united by shared dislikes of liberalism, globalism, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism (Haynes, 2020, pp. 61–62). Trump’s ideas about immigration and the necessity of keeping Muslims out of the USA struck a chord with many such people. For example, Sebastian Kurz, Austria’s chancellor, thought out loud about a “Berlin-Rome-Vienna” axis to fight illegal immigration, and Richard Grenell, US ambassador to Germany between 2018 and 2020, sought to encourage Trump-style populist nationalists in Germany and other European countries (Stewart, 2020).

Donald Trump was elected president in November 2016 in the context of rising anti-immigration and “anti-Muslim” sentiment. Trump is sometimes identified as a “nativist” (Bergmann, 2020). A nativist believes that the rights of indigenous people are much greater than those of immigrants. For the US-based, Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde, nativism is “xenophobic nationalism . . . an ideology that wants congruence of state and nation – the political and the cultural unit. It wants one state for every nation and one nation for every state. It perceives all non-natives . . . as threatening. But the non-native is not only people. It can also be ideas” (Mudde quoted in Friedman, 2017).

Nativism is said to be most appealing during periods when people feel the harmony between state and nation is disappearing. This is not to claim that Trump is necessarily a nativist because of belief rather than opportunism. According to Mudde, Trump quickly learned during the presidential campaign that “nativism was popular”. Mudde notes that “Trump’s campaign speeches were initially quite boring, often with copious allusions to his ‘always successful’ real estate deals, but he noticed that crowds were very pleased when he spoke [about] ‘building a border wall with Mexico or barring radical Islamic terrorists from the country’” (emphasis in
original; Mudde quoted in Friedman, 2017). DiMaggio (2019, p. 118) contends that Trump’s “support for a ban on immigration from Muslim-majority countries, and his plan to build a separation wall between the US and Mexico both demonstrated his support for racist, xenophobic policy positions.”

Many Americans’ popular response to Trump’s allusion to twin dangers posed by Mexicans and radical Islam reflected fears among many voters at the outcome of growing economic insecurity following the 2008 global financial crisis. It is not the case that a resort to nativism is a uniquely Trumpian tactic to acquire votes. García notes that such sentiments have long been a feature of US politics. For example, initial naturalization laws in the USA allowed only white European immigrants to be eligible for naturalization. In the mid-nineteenth century, nativists, known as the “Know-Nothings”, opposed the entry into the USA of German and Irish immigrants. Later, in 1882, Congress voted to bar Chinese immigration to America. In the early twentieth century, the anti-immigrant targets sought to enter the USA from Eastern and Southern Europe, including Russia, Poland, Italy, and Greece. In the early 1920s, immigration was severely limited from these parts of Europe under a quota system. From the 1930s, the nativists’ main fear was unacceptable levels of immigration from Mexico; many blamed Mexicans for the economic woes of the Great Depression, as they were believed to be “stealing” Americans’ jobs. The 1970s saw the invention of a new term, “illegal alien”, which criminalized those attempting to enter the USA illegally. In 1994, California passed “Proposition 187” that denied the undocumented, including their children, access to public services, including education” (García, 2018). Finally, as Belew (2018) explains, the development of “white power” crystallized fears among some Americans about what they saw as white people losing their historical supremacy in a fast-changing country.

Clearly, there is nothing novel about Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric and, as president, policies; such ideas have been a prominent feature of US politics for more than a century. As García (2018) puts it, “nativist and racist sentiments unfortunately continue under Trump. He is part of a long line of white Americans who fear ‘losing’ what they perceive to be ‘their country’ and not be ‘infested’, as Trump puts it, with immigrants and refugees of color”. During the 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns, it was clear that many Americans were concerned about the impact and effects of illegal migration from Mexico, as well as the threat from “radical Islamic terrorism”. The issue, on the one hand, was about illegal immigration into the USA from Mexico and elsewhere in Central America, and on the other, it focused on the position of hundreds of thousands of Muslims already living legally in America and the policy to be adopted with regard to others who also wanted to immigrate to the USA. Some among them, Trump claimed, were actively engaged in terrorist activities (Milton, 2017).

During his presidency, Trump surrounded himself with white nationalists, including Stephen Miller, Stephen K. Bannon, and Sebastian Gorka. Each was a short-term (Bannon, Gorka) or long-term member of his administration (Miller). These men share an understanding that the USA is engaged in a culture war between nativists and globalists. Miller was Trump’s chief speechwriter and is credited with authoring Trump’s “American carnage” presidential inaugural address. He was a key adviser since the early days of Trump’s presidency and chief architect of Trump’s executive order restricting immigration from several Middle Eastern countries. Few on the hard-right thought he needed to offer any clarification or qualification for this policy. Guerrero (2020) describes Miller as the architect of Trump’s border and immigration policies, helping Trump, “conjure an invasion of animals to come steal American jobs and spill American blood”.

Stephen Bannon is a former White House Chief Strategist, past Breitbart chief, and putative leader of a far-right populist international movement, “The Movement”. “Bannon helped
get Stephen Miller into the Trump administration, and Bannon was another one of Stephen Miller’s mentors“ (Guerrero, 2020). Despite recent travails, Bannon is an influential figure on the far right both in the USA and internationally. He regards himself as an ideologue and proponent of the America First agenda. Bannon believes that America’s foundational values are rooted in nativist ethics and principles (Tondo, 2018). Bannon was a key adviser during the first nine months of the presidency of Donald Trump. He was ousted from this role in September 2017, following infighting in the White House, involving Trump’s son-in-law and senior adviser, Jared Kushner.

Bannon is both an economic nationalist and nativist, an admirer of several right-wing French ideologues and novelists, including Renaud Camus, who coined the phrase “The Great Replacement”, and Jean Raspail, author of a 1973 novel, The Camp of the Saints. Camus refers to what he understands as a “plot” to replace ethnic French people with Muslim migrants. In his 2012 book, The Great Replacement, which echoes the concerns of Raspail’s earlier book, Camus writes of the conspiracy theory that native Catholic French people, and Christian Europeans more generally, will eventually be completely sidelined and substituted by waves of immigrants from North Africa, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa. This theory found a ready home among some right-wing nationalists in the USA, such as Richard Spencer (Malice, 2018). Raspail’s ideas are at the root of the “identitarian” doctrine, which claims that globalization will create an undesirable homogeneous culture, with disappearing distinct national and/or cultural identities. An alternative, “true pluralism” or “ethnopluralism” would imply separation of races. These ideas are said to have influenced both “Steve Bannon at Breitbart and the American white supremacist leader Richard Spencer” (Jones, 2018).

The Trump administration closely linked populist nationalism with conservative Christian values and beliefs. Trump is electorally dependent on the combined political support of (secular) right-wing nationalists and conservative Christians – that is, the “Christian Right”. Trump’s electoral slogan – “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) – found favour with both Christian and secular supporters. MAGA brought together both strands of Trump’s support in a yearning for the perceived halcyon days of a white, conservative Christian America. The apparent desire was to “return” to a time when the “American dream” seemed eminently realizable, buoyed by strong and persistent economic growth, continually rising prosperity, and the triumph of get-up-and-go dynamism. MAGA also implied an extended fight against the allegedly corrupt administrative/bureaucratic system, that is, the “deep state” a.k.a. “the swamp”. For the Christian Right, MAGA included a strong social and political influence for their preferred brand of Christianity: conservative, Protestant, and evangelical. In this worldview, women know their place both in the workplace and at home; ethnic, religious, and racial minorities know their place in the social, political, and economic order and should not try “too hard” to improve their existential positions via “affirmative action”; and the USA is safe from both internal and external attack, including the baleful influence of “foreign” ideas, especially Islamism and globalism.

**Right-wing populism and Christian civilizationism in Western Europe**

As in the USA, in Western Europe Christian civilizationism is a significant feature of current expressions of right-wing populism. Right-wing populists are widespread in the region, some are politically significant, and all seek to exploit some people’s increasing sense of insecurity. As in America, European right-wing populists portray “Islam”, Islamism, and Muslims as major threats to indigenous “Christian” Europeans’ “civilizational integrity” (Brubaker,
2017a, 2017b; Joppke, 2018; Haynes, 2019b, 2019c). Although Christian civilizationism is generically characterized by anti-Islamism, it is expressed somewhat differently dependent on context, reflecting the specificity of political narratives according to local concerns. Generally, in Western Europe, Christianity and religion merge with nationhood and secularism, although the relationship varies from country to country. For example, Le Rassemblement National in France underplays Christianity and highlights secularism, in line with French republican values (DeHanas and Shterin, 2018). Compared to the USA, the use of Christian civilizationism by right-wing populists in Western Europe reflects the latter region’s more advanced secularism. Put another way, while most Americans believe that the USA is a “Christian nation”, many Western Europeans believe that they inhabit a “post-Christian” or secular environment. Christianity retains a cultural significance but is much less important politically compared to the USA, where the influence of the Christian Right is highly significant politically (Young, 2017; Whitehead et al., 2018).

In Western Europe, the ideology of Christian civilizationism stems from a claim that there is little or no common cultural ground linking Muslims and Christians because of supposedly different cultural characteristics. For Christian civilizationists, the Muslim presence in Europe is destabilizing and leads to increased societal insecurity. European right-wing populist parties employ Christian civilizationist ideology reflecting one of two perspectives. Brubaker (2017a, p. 1203) observes that such parties tend to fluctuate between two opposing views. First, there is a “traditional”, patriarchal vision of society focused on Christianity’s conservative interpretation. Such “traditional” Christian values express socially and politically conservative ideas regarding gender issues, sexual morality, and personal rights. Examples include Marine Le Pen, former leader of France’s Le Rassemblement National, who expresses support for conservative “family values” (Joppke, 2018). Second, Dutch right-wing populists have long been at the forefront of the right-wing populist liberal approach to Islam’s claimed illiberalism, augmented by “philosemitism, gender equality, and support for gay rights”. These are regarded by such right-wing populists as “common European values”, along with respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law. Such right-wing populists express “putatively liberal views on issues of gender and sexuality as a way of distinguishing a Christian civilization from allegedly regressive and repressive Islamic cultures” (DeHanas and Shterin, 2018, p. 177). This approach was adopted by both the assassinated Dutch populist, Pim Fortuyn, and his ideological successor, Geert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom.

While in a broader European perspective, the contours of Dutch right-wing populist, anti-immigrant politics are atypical, especially with respect to the centrality of the themes of sexual liberation and gay rights, more right-wing populists are now instrumentally adopting such a view. Anti-immigrant/anti-Muslim, right-wing populist parties not only in France, but also in Norway, Denmark, and elsewhere, place emphasis on gender equality, human rights, freedom of speech, individualism, and gay rights. They do this as they seek to increase their votes and thus acquire more mainstream legitimacy, repositioning themselves as defenders of liberal values, grounded in a secularized Judeo-Christian culture, against the “threat” of “illiberal” Islam (Herbert, 2020).

DeHanas and Shterin (2018, p. 178) observe that, despite such differences, the “same dynamics of Christian civilizationism are mirrored in many cases throughout Europe and in the U.S.” Brubaker (2017a, 2017b), Joppke (2018), Kalmar (2018), and Lloyd (2017) identify Christian civilizationism as a key driver of right-wing populist ideas informing a sense of “pan-European civilizational identity”, which is said to be threatened by and ready to threaten another civilizational identity – Islam. Lloyd (2017) claims that Christian civilizationism “poses grave dangers
Right-wing populism and religion in comparative perspective

175

practising or cultural Christians – against another: practising and cultural Muslims. This emphasizes that the appeal of “civilizationism” is the claimed primacy of one group’s cultural and religious bonds compared to others because of allegedly “irreducible cultural differences” (Marchetti, 2016, p. 123). As ever, timing is everything in politics: “The fact that the Christian references were made just when the opposition to Muslim immigrants became central to these parties (which it had not always been) suggests that its adoption is not religiously but culturally, even instrumentally, motivated: Christianism in the hands of extreme right parties is simply a club to beat Islam”.

(Joppke, 2018, p. 238)

In Western Europe, Huysmans (2000, p. 751) notes, “migration has developed into a security issue [and] the European integration process is implicated in it”. Farny (2016) observes that, in recent years, “many [Western] countries have seen a rise in immigration, coupled with an increasing fear of ‘terrorists’, ‘illegal migrants’ and other threats to internal safety”. According to Davies (2018), the rise of right-wing populist politicians in Western Europe is explicable both “as the expression of cultural anxieties surrounding identity and immigration” and “in largely economic terms – as a revolt among those ‘left behind’ by inequality and globalization” (Author’s interviews with #3, #4, #5).

Brubaker (2016) notes that in Western Europe prior to 9/11, there was “growing civilizational preoccupation with Islam . . . responding to the increasing global visibility of political Islam in the post–Cold War environment. But of course, 9/11 and subsequent attacks in Europe gave it an enormous boost”. The 2015 refugee crisis was another “enormous boost” to the emergence and profile of Christian civilizationism, a catalyst for greatly increased political and media attention on desperate people fleeing conflicts in Syria and elsewhere, and some politicians and media chose to highlight that the great majority were Muslims. It coincided with the run-up to the UK’s June 2016 “Brexit” referendum during which right-wing populist politicians, such as the then leader of the UK Independence party (UKIP), Nigel Farage, chose to produce a highly misleading electoral poster advertisement purporting to illustrate almost unlimited demand from “Muslims” and other non-Europeans to enter the UK. The poster suggested that such people were not Europeans and could not be expected to adhere to European values and cultural norms. However, Farage’s was not an isolated voice; as Sharify-Funk (2013) notes in the title of a recent article: in Western Europe, there is a “pervasive anxiety about Islam”.

Right-wing populist discourse in Western Europe is typically Islamophobic, and Farage’s stance is not unusual. Several Western European countries have relatively large percentages of Muslims, between 3% and 8%. In several regional countries, such as France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany, right-wing populists identify Muslims as the “enemy within”, which threatens European civilization. Both George (2016) and Polakow-Suransky (2017) argue that real or instrumental right-wing outrage against “radical Islamic terrorism”, sharia law, and the alleged misogyny of many Muslim men, is a key component of a political project whose aim is to increase popular support and the political profile of European right-wing populist politicians. While they may profess no dislike for or aversion to individual Muslims, they do proclaim strong antipathy to the politicization of Islam in the form of Islamism and associated attempts to “impose” unwelcome “Muslim values” on “Christian Europe”. The electoral appeal of right-wing populist politicians is to their fellow citizens that share their concerns by focusing on the “competing” civilizational norms and values, which coalesce around individualistic, liberal values on the one hand, and collective, conservative values, on the other. In addition, there
is the widespread popular fear of Islamist extremism and terrorism. Nigel Farage, then leader of the UK Independence Party, stated in March 2015:

I think perhaps one of the reasons the polls show an increasing level of concern is because people do see a fifth column living within our country, who hate us and want to kill us. So don’t be surprised if there isn’t a slight increase in people’s worries and concerns. You know, when you’ve got British, when you’ve got people, born and bred in Cardiff, with British passports, going out to fight for Isis, don’t be surprised if there isn’t an uptick in concern. There has been an uptick in concern, but does it make us a prejudiced people? No.

(Mason, 2015)

Farage’s comments can be understood in the context of successive UK governments’ attempts to encourage a multicultural society in Britain. According to Zemni, “multiculturalism has taken shape as a legitimizing paradigm of the Western democracies, and of the European Union itself. It has developed into a cultural-political cornerstone of societies simultaneously in full transition towards economic globalization on the one hand, and potentially prey to the advent/resurgence of far-right and/or fascistic political organizations on the other hand” (emphasis added; Zemni, 2002, p. 158).

Writing two decades ago, Zemni saw multiculturalism as a “legitimising paradigm” and “cultural-political cornerstone” of both the European Union and Western democracies in general. It would be difficult to make the same claim with assurance today (Author’s interviews with #1 and #2). This is because many Western countries, including several in Western Europe, have experienced a diminution of the perceived desirability of multiculturalism and a parallel increase in the political salience of right-wing populism with civilizationist characteristics, seeking to pit practicing and cultural Christians against Muslim emigrants. This section has demonstrated that the recent use of Christian civilizationism by right-wing populists in Western Europe is not a reassertion of religious differences or a generic “return of religion” to the public realm. Rather, it is a focused employment of culturalized political language exploiting both the fear of sustained mass Muslim immigration, as well as the real or perceived malign socio-economic impacts of globalization. This has led to significant job losses in certain industries, augmented by cultural anxieties surrounding identity and immigration. Like in the USA, however, the focus on Islam and Muslims highlights the perceived difficulties of how to incorporate different people and their beliefs into environments historically dominated by Christian norms and values.

Conclusions

What stands out, in both the USA and Europe, is the willingness of right-wing populists and their supporters to highlight what they regard as key civilizational differences between themselves and their supporters and Muslims. In the USA, figures such as Stephen Bannon lionize the virtues and values of Christian individualism, capitalism, and perceived links to “Judeo-Christian values” (Haynes, 2017). In Europe, the focus is on – often increasingly secular – “European values”, which are nevertheless said by right-wing populists to emanate from Christian foundations, different from those to which Muslims are supposed to adhere.

In highly secular Western Europe, there is less opportunity to highlight Christian values. Instead, right-wing populist politicians, such as Gert Wilders in the Netherlands, attack Islam because of its allegedly unenlightened and anti-progressive values and highlight post-Christian “enlightened” and “socially progressive” approaches to social issues, including women’s rights
Right-wing populism and religion in comparative perspective

and gay marriage. Figures like Wilders contrast their “liberal” views with those of supposedly “illiberal” Muslims.

Muslim immigration and fears of Islamist terrorism are common factors in securitization of Islam in the USA and Europe. Coupled with this is a general, dramatic, and palpable decline in “toleration” especially in relation to Muslim immigrants who, many believe, are civilizational – that is, culturally and religiously – distinct from the USA and Europe’s host communities. These divisions undermine the chances of democracy working for everyone, while making relationships between civilizations of great interest to students of democratization and society (Kaya and Técmen, 2019).

The ideology of “Christian civilizationism” encourages some right-wing politicians and commentators in the USA and Europe to characterize Muslims uniformly in a malign way. This approach makes no distinction between, on the one hand, the mass of “moderate”, “ordinary” Muslims and, on the other hand, the tiny minority of Islamist extremists and even smaller fraction of violent extremists and terrorists among Muslims. This encourages Islamophobia in both Europe and the USA, primarily characterized by a perception of “all-Muslims-as-threat”, whether via violent extremism and terrorism, by the specter of (extremist) sharia law or by (the fear of) Muslim mass immigration. Whatever the cause of the concern, however, the outcome is said to be the same: irrevocably to change host cultures for the worst. This leads to the conclusion that the so-called “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West has two interactive, although conceptually separate, dimensions: Islam as a security issue and Islam as a civilizational issue, focusing on culture and values.

This chapter examined how and why the ideology of Christian civilizationism has been exploited by right-wing populists in the USA and Western Europe. It encouraged such politicians openly to vilify Islam and Muslims and to exhort voters to regard them as an existential threat. However, as the memory of 9/11 fades, the threat of “Islamic terrorism” seems to have diminished, consequential to the demise of the Islamic State and the downsizing of al-Qaeda. Right-wing populists turned to what they refer to as mass Muslim immigration into Europe. In the USA the alleged invasion of unwanted foreigners – especially “Mexicans” necessitating, according to President Trump, the building of a “great big beautiful wall” – also included Muslims from a number of countries (“the Muslim ban”). This was because of Muslims’ alleged propensity towards terrorism and the supposed cultural threat they posed to America’s “Judeo-Christian” values. Future research might usefully extend the analysis to examine how the foci of right-wing populists differs in countries beyond the USA and Western Europe. For example, the comparative focus could be extended to include countries such as India and Israel. Both have right-wing populists in power who vilify Muslims for political gain, identifying them as security and cultural threats. How their political appeals differ from those of their counterparts in the USA and Western and Central Europe would help identify the comparative impact of global and domestic factors on right-wing populists and their policies and programs.

Notes

1 As Ekström et al. (2018) note, populism can be either “left-wing” or “right-wing”. This chapter is concerned with the latter in the USA and Europe. The term “right-wing” is analytically difficult. Many of the parties mentioned or noted in the chapter prefer a social democratic-style welfare-state compared to one where “market forces” take precedence. Where the designation “right-wing” comes in is that such a state is primarily meant for those judged on ethnicity rather than citizenship. This chapter looks explicitly at what the author refers to as “right-wing” rather than “left-wing” populism. Several parties in Europe, such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, as well as Bernie Sanders in the USA would fall into the category of “left-wing” populism. Another difference between “left-wing” and
“right-wing” populism is that the former are not generally associated with anti-Muslim discourse/Islamophobia.

2 Islam is sometimes portrayed as something else than a faith, for example, a “fascist” political ideology, whereby some Muslims are said to be radicalized. The *taqqiya* trope is regularly referred to in this context: an extremist Islamist is said to deceive society by concealing his or her radicalization. The wider point is that both Islam and Muslims may be articulated in various ways, not only related to “faith”.

3 In this context, a nativist American is a white Protestant whose forebears entered the USA from the UK, Germany, or Scandinavia (Young, 2017).

4 This chapter is a revised and edited version of an open access paper by the present author: Haynes, Jeffrey. 2020. “Right-Wing Populism and Religion in Europe and the USA” *Religions* 11, no. 10: 490. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11100490

5 Christian evangelicals are Protestant, often Pentecostalists.


8 The five mainly Muslim countries are Iran, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia; as well as two, mainly non-Muslim states: North Korea and Venezuela.

9 The Southern Poverty Law Center reported in February 2017, soon after Trump assumed the presidency, that the numbers of “anti-Muslim hate groups” in the USA had tripled between 2015 and 2017, increasing threefold: from 34 to 101 (www.splcenter.org/).

10 Breitbart is a right-wing website.

11 In July 2022, Bannon was convicted of contempt of Congress for defying a Capitol attack subpoena (www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jul/22/steve-bannon-trial-trump-contempt-congress-charges).

12 A cultural Muslim is religiously unobservant, secular, or irreligious. Yet, such people continue to identify with Islamic or Muslim culture as a result of personal and/or social factors, including family background, personal experiences, or the social and cultural environment where they grew up. A cultural Christian has the same traits from a Christian perspective.

13 See www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/ for relevant percentages. In Western Europe, the highest percentages are in France, Belgium, Netherlands, and Germany. The average in the region is 4.9%.

**Author’s personal interviews**

#1 Academic expert on international migration, Maria Grzegorzewska University, Warsaw, Poland, Berlin, 19 June 2018.


#3 Former Senior Pakistan diplomat, Washington, DC, 25 April 2018.


**References**


Right-wing populism and religion in comparative perspective


