RELIGION AND ANTI-IMMIGRATION PARTIES IN THE WEST

Identitarian Christianism and exclusivist secularism

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Introduction

This chapter investigates the ambiguous relationship between anti-immigrant parties and religion. It thereby focuses in particular on the situation in Western Europe and the United States, where religious references have become a prominent feature in anti-immigrant parties’ and movements’ rhetoric (Marzouki et al., 2016; Whitehead and Perry, 2020). Examples range from pro-Trump protesters staging sit-in prayers during the 2021 Capitol riots, through Germany’s anti-immigrant Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident (PEGIDA) movement waving oversized crosses in Germany’s national colours at their demonstrations, to Italy’s far-right leader Matteo Salvini brandishing rosaries and Bibles during campaign speeches.

These episodes are representative of two broader developments across Western democracies: the rise of anti-immigrant and right-wing populist parties and their intensified references to religion. Anti-immigrant and right-wing populist parties prioritise national identity and culture, and claim that the “pure and homogenous” people are threatened on the one hand by a contemptuous and corrupt “liberal elite” and on the other hand by the mass immigration of culturally different, external “others” (Marzouki et al., 2016; Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018). Parties of this type have been present across the West for decades. However, they experienced a marked surge in electoral support and moved into the centre of public and scholarly attention in the mid-2010s after the successful Brexit referendum in the UK and the election of Donald Trump as president in the US (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020).

Importantly the resurgence of anti-immigrant parties’ electoral fortunes also coincided with their intensified references to religion. This development is noteworthy not only because many anti-immigrant parties had historically been relatively indifferent or even hostile towards religion (Marzouki et al., 2016), but also because most Western democracies experienced accelerating levels of secularisation at the same time (Norris and Inglehart, 2011; Pew, 2018, 2019). Thus, just as record levels of Europeans and Americans were turning away from the religious faith and practice, anti-immigrant parties began to politicise religious identity in several ways. One was their intensifying references to the West’s Christian heritage:
from Washington to Warsaw and from Reykjavik to Rome, anti-immigrant politicians have begun to evoke their countries’ Christian identity, display Christian symbols, debate the role of religion in public spaces, and present themselves as defenders of the Christian West against culturally different migrants (Marzouki et al., 2016; Whitehead and Perry, 2020; Cremer, 2023). Many scholars have taken these developments as cause to interpret anti-immigrant parties to be driven by Christian nationalism and conservative religiosity (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Whitehead and Perry, 2020).

However, references to Christianity are not the only way in which religion has been featuring in anti-immigrant parties’ rhetoric. Other traditional religious references include the use of neo-pagan symbolism in many identitarian and alt-right movements, as epitomised recently by the “Shamanic practitioner” in animal fur and Viking veneer who stood on the dais of the US Senate during the 2021 Capitol riots (François, 2008; Roy, 2016; Cremer, 2021c). More significantly, anti-immigrant parties, in particular in Western Europe, have also begun to politicise religion by embracing radical forms of secularism (Almeida, 2017; Brubaker, 2017; Cremer, 2021d). The French Rassemblement National for instance has positioned itself as a champion of a radically secularist reading of Laïcité, while the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has called for their members to leave the churches and demanded the latter to be stripped of their constitutional privileges (Cremer, 2021b). While the combination of Christian, neo-pagan and secularist references might appear perplexing, scholars have argued that their common thread is that none of them are based on a positive embrace of Christianity, neo-paganism or secularism, but that each is used as an antidote against the “Islamic other” (Betz and Meret, 2009; Rosenberg, 2021; Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2021). Indeed, according to some observers, anti-immigrant parties’ negative rejection of Islam is the key defining and unifying feature of an otherwise highly diverse and conflict-ridden party family (Zúquete, 2018; Hamid, 2019).

Given these varied and ambiguous expressions of the relationship between anti-immigrant parties and religion, this chapter explores why these parties may seek to mobilise religious identity in times of growing secularisation in the first place, and how religious communities themselves have responded to this. To do so this chapter analyses the socio-demographic roots of anti-immigrant parties’ electoral success, the role of religion in right-wing identity politics as a cultural identity marker between the “us” and the “other”, as well as how clashes with the Christian churches, in particular over immigration policy, shape anti-immigrant parties’ relationship with religion across different countries and regions. The overall argument of this chapter is that in the West’s increasingly post-Christian societies, anti-immigrant parties are less interested in religion as a faith, than in religion as a cultural identity marker and that in particular an identitarian Christianism, and exclusive secularism are employed as ways to demarcate the national community from the Islamic “civilisational other”. Rather than being driven by any form of resurgent religiosity in the West, these findings suggest that the rise of anti-immigrant parties and their culturalised references to religion may be symptoms or even drivers of the further secularisation of religious symbols in Western politics as the latter’s focus shifts from religious culture wars of the twentieth century to a new more secular identity politics of the twenty-first century.

This chapter is organised in three parts. The first section explores the concept of anti-immigrant parties and movements in more detail, paying particular attention to the socio-demographic roots of their support and the nature of their populist and nativist identity politics. The second section investigates the role of religion in the context exploring the culturalisation of religion as civilisational identity markers of the “us” and the “other”, and its detachment from religious values, beliefs and institutions in anti-immigrant parties’ rhetoric. Finally, the third
section studies how these dynamics work out in practice by comparing the varying responses from Christian communities in Europe and the US.

The socio-demographic roots of anti-immigrant parties’ success: Secularisation, individualisation, and the new identity cleavage

The rise and electoral success of anti-immigrant parties and movements has received much scholarly and public attention in recent years. The election of Donald Trump to the US presidency, Brexit in Britain, and Marine Le Pen’s repeated entry into the runoff for the French presidential elections in 2017 and 2022 have often attracted the brunt of the attention (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). However, anti-immigrant parties have experienced similar electoral successes in almost all Western democracies. In several countries such as Austria, Sweden, or Italy such parties have also participated in governments (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015; Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Yet, one conceptually confusing fact is that in spite of their success and ubiquity, scholars have hitherto failed to agree on a term to describe the new party family (Kaltwasser et al., 2017). While some call them “anti-immigrant”, others have labelled them as “right-wing populist”, “radical right”, “far right”, “extreme right”, “alt right”, “national populist”, “nativist” or “nationalist”; many observers use such terms interchangeably. This terminological confusion is intensified by many commentators’ tendency to use these terms as political “Kampfbegriffe”, conflating them with morally loaded terms like opportunism, political manipulation, or demagogy, and reserving them for the political “enemy” (Bale et al., 2011, p. 127; Mudde, 2004; Betz, 2018).

It is, therefore, important to recognise that while terms like “populist” or “anti-immigrant” are often used to describe the same party family, they are not necessarily synonymous but tend to capture different characteristics and dynamics. Populism is at its core about the juxtaposition of the “pure people” against the “corrupted” elite and the idea that politics should be the expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people (Mudde, 2004, p. 543, see also Haynes in Chapter 1 of this volume). It can therefore be both right-wing and left-wing, as shown by the fact that both Jeremy Corby and Nigel Farage in the UK, or Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in the US are widely defined as “populist” (Mudde, 2007; Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015). Anti-immigrationism by contrast is primarily characterised by nativism; that is the view that “states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (‘the nation’) and that non-native elements are fundamentally threatening the homogenous nation-state” (Mudde, 2007, p. 19; Betz, 2018; Casanova, 2012). In principle, anti-immigrant parties could be populist or elitist, and their justification can be cultural or economic (Betz, 2018). Yet, in practice anti-immigrationism and populism increasingly overlap in the West, as radical right and anti-immigrant parties have adopted populism and cultural nativism as key aspects of their rhetoric (Betz, 2018). As a result, contemporary anti-immigrant and right-wing populist parties’ worldview can be defined by a triangular relationship between, on the one hand, the pure and homogenous people (the “us”), and, on the other hand, a set of two “others” which are seen to threaten the identity of the “us”: first, the internal other, that is the corrupted liberal elite, which threatens the people from the inside (this is the populist component). And secondly, is the external other, which threatens the homogenous people from the outside (this is the nativist or anti-immigrant component) (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015).

To better understand the roots behind the convergence of populism and nativism in anti-immigrant movements, and to make sense of why religious identity has become such a prominent feature in anti-immigrant definitions of the “external other” and of the “us”, it is important to examine the socio-demographic trends underlying anti-immigrant parties’ electoral success. There is a growing body of literature tracing these successes back to the emergence of a new
social cleavage in Western societies around the question of identity: who are “we” and who is the “other” (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; De Wilde et al., 2019; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). On the one hand, of this divide is a sizeable and outspoken part of the population – including most of the economic and political “elite” – that tends to embrace individualist or globalist identities focussed on cosmopolitan values, multi-culturalism and diversity (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; De Wilde et al., 2019). And on the other hand, there is a camp that is characterised by a continued yearning for clearly defined collective identities, social ties, shared cultural frameworks and other sources of group belonging. Observers have called this a divide between “Globalists” and “Nativists” (Piketty, 2020), “Identity liberals” and “Identity conservatives” (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020), “Nomads” and “Settlers” (Fourquet, 2019), “Cosmopolitains” and “Communitarians” (De Wilde et al., 2019).

In many Western societies this new “identity cleavage” is becoming a prominent feature of the political discourse, as identitarian concerns about immigration, national culture and ethnic identity rise in salience and overshadow traditional economic or social questions. This is particularly true for voters of anti-immigrant and right-wing populist parties, with surveys showing that, for instance, 80% of Marine Le Pen voters in 2017 ranked “immigration” as the most important electoral issue, placing it way above economic concerns such as unemployment or social questions such as gay marriage (Perrineau, 2017). Similarly, Donald Trump’s voters in 2016 rated “immigration”, “respect” and “race relations” amongst the top motives for their choice and far above social issues like abortion or gay marriage (Sides et al., 2019). Sobolewska and Ford have argued that immigration and a new “identity conflict” between “identity liberals” and “identity conservatives” were the key drivers for “Leave” voters in the Brexit referendum and the subsequent transformation of Britain’s political landscape (Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). And Kaufmann concluded that “no one (. . .) can deny that white majority concern over immigration is the main cause of the rise of the populist right in the west” (Kaufmann, 2018, p. 2).

The emergence of the new identity cleavage and of immigration and national identity as key wedge issues in Western politics is noteworthy as for most of the twentieth century Western politics and party systems were structured according to two other social cleavages around class and religion (Lipset and Rokkan, 1990; Bornschier, 2010). Broadly speaking, in this framework centre-left parties represented the interests of the secular state and the working class, whereas the centre-right represented capitalist interests and the position of the church (Lipset and Rokkan, 1990; Elf and Roßteutscher, 2017). However, this party system, which had been “frozen” for almost a century, has begun to “thaw” since the turn of the millennium, as new parties emerged on the left and on the right while mainstream parties began to shrink. Anti-immigrant parties have been one of the main beneficiary of this development, tripling their overall vote-share throughout Europe between 2006 and 2016 (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

Some scholars have interpreted the rise of the populist right, too, through the prisms of the old cleavages as an economic revolt of the white working class, or as a reactionary backlash driven by white Christian nationalism (Rodrik, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Whitehead and Perry, 2020). However, more and more studies suggest that the most important driver of this development may be the “identity cleavage” (De Wilde et al., 2019; Piketty, 2020; Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). In fact, it may be the very erosion of class or religious identity in the context of processes like secularisation and individualisation that has contributed to the new cleavage by creating a crisis of identity in parts of the population (Fourquet, 2019). In this context, the decline of class identity is often seen as a root cause for the defection of many blue-collar voters from left-wing to anti-immigrant parties (Piketty, 2020). Yet, it is the loss or transformation of religious identity and the ways it has fed into the rise of anti-immigrant parties that is of particular interest for this chapter.
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Christian practice, belief and affiliation, which had shaped the social fabric and identity of Western countries for centuries have entered an unprecedented decline over last few decades (Norris and Inglehart, 2011; Pew, 2016). Although critics of secularisation theory have been correct in pointing out that modernisation in many non-European societies had been accompanied by religious pluralisation or even revival rather than by religious decline, in the West itself secularisation theorists’ predictions that religion’s relevance in society was to progressively erode seem to be confirmed by the data (Norris and Inglehart, 2011; Fourquet, 2019). Thus, in many historically Christian societies such as Britain, France or Germany, self-identified Christians had become a minority by the beginning of the 2020, while the percentage of those attending church had dropped to single digits throughout most of Europe (Pew, 2016; British Social Attitudes, 2019; Gutmann and Peters, 2021; IFOP, 2021). Even traditional outliers to the secularisation trend such as Ireland, Italy and most notably the US, have begun to follow this trend. For instance, Americans professing no faith at all outnumbered any single religious group for the first time in 2016, and Ireland has recorded one of the most rapid drops in religiosity in the world with 44% of Irish considering themselves not to be religious in 2012 (up from 25% in 2005) (Gallup, 2012; Pew, 2019).

The consequences of these developments for politics and society are likely to be momentous. Not only because they are set to further decrease the salience of the religious cleavage and associated moral issues, but also because religion has historically been a key source of social capital, especially in many working-class communities which historically strongly relied on religious institutions as cost-free providers of social capital and belonging (Putnam and Campbell, 2012). As a result some scholars have argued that Christianity’s demise might lead a collapse of the old social matrix and the subsequent emergence of a social and spiritual vacuum and identity crisis that can readily be exploited by political actors (Fourquet, 2019; Roy, 2019). This latent crisis of traditional sources of class and religious identity seems to have further heightened in recent years by cultural anxieties over rapid ethnic change, high levels of immigration, Islamic terrorism and challenges to national sovereignty through international integration (Betz and Meret, 2009; Casanova, 2012; Brubaker, 2017). As a result, the new identity cleavage is likely to only increase in salience as long-term socio-demographic developments like globalisation, secularisation, individualisation and ethnic diversification continue. It is in an attempt to capitalise on this development and to politicise identitarian grievances further, that anti-immigrant parties have begun to appeal to the communitarian end of the identity cleavage with their own brand of right-wing identity politics, in the context of which religious symbols and language have become an increasingly central feature (Roy, 2016; Haynes, 2020).

Religion in the context of anti-immigrant identity politics

To better understand why and how anti-immigrant parties are seeking to mobilise religion in the context of their identity politics, it is useful to recall how in anti-immigrant parties’ triangular worldview the “us” (the pure and homogenous people) is defined in opposition to a set of two “others”: on the one hand the corrupted liberal elite, which threatens the people’s identity from within, and on the other hand the external “other” which threatens it from without. One key development in Western anti-immigrant movements over the last few decades has been that this external other is increasingly defined in identitarian, civilisational and subsequently also religious terms as the “Islamic other”, and that Christianity (alongside neo-paganism and secularism) has emerged as an analogous identifier of the “us” (Betz and Meret, 2009; Brubaker, 2017; Haynes, 2019). However, this “identitarian turn” in anti-immigrant rhetoric was not a matter of course. As Betz observed, for many years anti-immigrant parties had predominantly defined
the “external other” on racial and economic terms (Betz, 2018). As a result, in the 1990s and 2000s anti-immigrant parties in Europe would mobilize primarily against central and eastern European economic migrants on the basis that they would undercut natives’ wages or abuse the welfare state rather than because of concerns about their cultural otherness (Betz, 2018, p. 55). The German far-right National Democratic Party (NPD), for example, campaigned with slogans like “work instead of migration” or “stop the Polish invasion”, while the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) launched a signature drive against eastern European migrants in 1993 under the motto “Austria First” (Betz, 2018). Migrants from non-European countries were additionally targeted based on their alleged racial or national “otherness”, but less so based on their culture or religion. As Casanova put it:

Only a few decades ago immigrants from Turkey in Germany were viewed as Turks and not as Muslims, immigrants from Pakistan in the UK were viewed as Pakistanis and not as Muslims, and immigrants from the Maghreb in France were viewed as Moroccans, Algerians or Tunisians, or generally as Maghrabis, and not as Muslims.

(Casanova, 2012, p. 489)

However, Casanova, observes a marked shift in anti-immigrant parties’ discourse of othering since the 1990s and early 2000s so that “today throughout Europe immigrants from Muslim countries are not only primarily classified as Muslims, but they have come to represent ‘Islam’ with all the baggage” (Casanova, 2012, p. 489).

The sources of this move from racial and economic towards civilizational and religious othering are complex, but scholars generally point to the rise of Islamophobia in the context of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as well as to the spread of the concept of ethnopluralism in far-right circles in response to the new identity cleavage (Betz and Meret, 2009; Casanova, 2012; Brubaker, 2017). Ethnopluralism – a concept which originated among the intellectuals of the French Nouvelle Droite in the 1980s, and which has become the intellectual fundament for many anti-immigrant parties’ identity politics since – is not simply to be equated with traditional racism based on biological racial hierarchies (Roy, 2019). Rather it follows the doctrine of “equal but different”, which holds that particular nations, cultures or ethnic groups have the right to defend their cultural differences (Kaufmann, 2018). As Roy put it, “these new thinkers (of the Nouvelle Droite) replaced references to ‘race’ with the concept of ‘culture’ and ‘ethnicity’ as developed by anthropologists and social scientists (. . .) In short they replaced racism with culturalism” (Roy, 2016, p. 83). In doing so they sought to cater explicitly to identitarian concerns on the communitarian end of the new identity cleavage by mirroring but reversing the identity politics of the Left (Kaufmann, 2018; Jardina, 2019). For instance, right-wing identity politics emphasises ethnic, cultural, civilisational or religious identity as drivers of political action, but reverses the roles by claiming to defend the group rights of the ethnic majority rather than those of minorities (Kaufmann, 2018; Sides et al., 2019). Another critical distinction between left-wing and right-wing identity politics is the latter’s claim that the ethnic majority’s cultural norms and identity should enjoy a preeminent or even hegemonic position within society (Kaufmann, 2018; Jardina, 2019).

Anti-immigrant parties quickly adopted this new brand of right-wing identity politics around the turn of the millennium, as appealing in such ways to the majority’s ethno-cultural group identity appeared of strategic value for two reasons. Firstly, conceptualising identity ex negativo and in such broad ways made right-wing identity politics sufficiently vague to appeal to large parts of an increasingly fragmented populace. Reflecting Hannah Arendt’s insight that it is only natural that “the masses of a highly atomized society (. . .) have tended toward an
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especially violent nationalism” (Arendt, 1973, p. 15), ethno-cultural group identity could serve as the smallest common denominator. The second advantage was that formulating this appeal in terms of identity politics resonated with the mainstream rhetoric about the importance of (minority) group rights, common perceptions of (in-)justice and victimhood narratives (Jardina, 2019). In this context, scholars like Kaufmann (2018), Jardina (2019) or Hochschild (2018) have argued that members of the majority population often feel “left out” by the identity politics of the Left, which they perceive as defending the group rights of minorities but undermining those of the majority. Growing parts of the majority population are therefore susceptible to rhetoric and policies that appeal to feelings of victimhood and decline.

As biological racism was hence (at least rhetorically) replaced by “culturalism” (Roy, 2019) and “civilisationism” (Brubaker, 2017) in anti-immigrant parties’ definition of the “external other” as the “Islamic other”, religion also rose to greater prominence as an analogous identity marker of the “us” (see also Haynes, 2019). While in most of the literature the focus is traditionally put on far-right movements’ attempts to politicise Christian symbols and language in this context, in the nouvelle droite itself, neo-paganism initially emerged as the anti-Islamic antidote of choice (François, 2008). The reason was that it was perceived as most authentically “European”, whereas Christianity was seen in Nietzschean terms as a “slave religion” and “semitic-sect” that originated from the Middle East, and secularism merely as a spin-off of Christian doctrine (Roy, 2019; Rose, 2021). References to neo-paganism, anti-Christian sentiments are still prominent in some anti-immigrant parties, and have gained significant influence in the alt-right subculture (François, 2008; Cremer, 2021c; Rose, 2021). However, in recent years anti-immigrant parties’ public focus has increasingly shifted away from neo-pagan references and instead focussed on radical secularism on the one hand and a cultural Christianism on the other, both of which were generally perceived as more palatable to mainstream voters (Brubaker, 2017).

References to secularism are particularly popular among anti-immigrant parties in Western Europe, where Christians are rapidly shrinking voting block that is historically bound to Christian democratic parties and still disproportionately focussed on the old moral rather than the new identitarian cleavage (Arzheimer and Carter, 2009; Elff and Roßteutscher, 2017). Rather than seeking to appeal on this hard-to-reach and dwindling demographic, some anti-immigrant politicians have, therefore, sought to instead present themselves as the defenders of Europe’s liberal and secular culture against reactionary Islam. One prominent example of this trend is the Netherlands’ Geert Wilders who also presented himself as a defender of Western liberal values vis-à-vis gay rights and women rights (Morieson, 2021). Others are France’s Marine Le Pen who has emerged as the country’s perhaps most outspoken champion of a radically secularist reading of Laïcité (Almeida, 2017; Cremer, 2021d), or Germany’s AfD, which has called for the country’s religion-friendly constitutional settlement of “benevolent neutrality” to be dismantled in favour of a more radical separation of church and state (Cremer, 2023). While anti-immigrant parties’ references to secularism and “liberal values” remain largely superficial, primarily driven by the rejection of Islam and generally limited to Western Europe, the rise of this new “post-Christian” or “secular right” is an important development which is likely to become more prominent as Western societies become more secular (Cremer, 2021d; Rose, 2021).

Yet at least for the time being, references to secularist values in anti-immigration parties’ rhetoric are still overshadowed by the latter’s references to Christianity. One way to use Christianity in this context is to imply Christian language and concepts to sacralise populist and nativist politics. Arato (2013) and Zúquete (2017) for example have shown that secular concepts such as territory, the population, immigrants and political elites are systematically “theologised” in anti-immigrant parties’ rhetoric into “the sacred homeland”, “the pure people”, “the dangerous others” and “the corrupted elite”. Similarly, populists’ Manichean distinction between the
“pure” people and the “corrupted” elite or “dangerous others” reflects religious concepts of good and evil (Arato, 2013). This construction of the “good people” as “a moral community” (Zúquete, 2017, p. 458) also endows the General Will of the alleged majority with “godlike dignity uniting power and justice”, whereas anyone who would want to restrain it becomes a heretic of democracy (Arato, 2013, p. 145).

Even more prevalent, however, than the use of Christian concepts to theologise nativist politics, is the culturalisation – or perhaps even secularisation – of Christian language, symbols and identity as civilisational identity markers against the “Islamic Other” (Roy, 2019; Haynes, 2020; Ozzano, 2021). The prominent display of crosses at pro-Trump rallies, anti-immigrant politicians’ rhetoric surrounding the defence of the “Judeo-Christian West”, or their catering to the concerns of Christian conservatives are examples of this strategy. However, it is important to emphasise that like with secularism, anti-immigrant parties’ appeals to Christian identity are often not tantamount to a positive embrace of Christianity as a faith, let alone of a Christian revival in Western societies. Instead, in the context of anti-immigrant parties’ right-wing identity politics, ethnoreligious belonging is increasingly dissociated from Christian beliefs, values and institutions, and transformed into what Roy has called a “kitsch Christianity”, that is depleted of any positive theological references and primarily defined ex negativo against Islam (Roy, 2019). Indeed, scholars like Rosenberg (2021) or Schwörer and Fernández-Garcia (2021) have shown that anti-immigrant parties’ references to Christianity almost exclusively appear in conjunction with negative references to Islam. What is more, elite interview-based research with anti-immigrant and right-wing populist leaders has revealed that both anti-immigrant party leaders and their grassroots often remain explicitly distanced from Christian doctrine and regularly clash with the institutional churches over key policy areas (Cremer, 2023).

In this context, the clash between anti-immigrant parties and the Christian churches over the core issue of immigration is a central source of conflict. For across countries and denominations, Europe’s and America’s Christian churches have generally been outspoken and consistent in their support of refugees as well as in their criticism of anti-immigrant rhetoric (Marzouki et al., 2016; Melkonian-Hoover and Kellstedt, 2019). Anti-immigrant parties themselves have openly acknowledged and reciprocated this animosity, with, for instance, the French far-right leader Éric Zemmour referring to the pope as “the enemy of Europe” or the German AfD calling the institutional churches “stooges of the asylum industry” and “government spokespeople” (Valeurs Actuelles, 2020; Cremer, 2021b). Even in countries like the US where anti-immigrant politicians traditionally have more amicable relations with the Christian conservatives, Christian leaders have openly spoken out against the Trump governments’ anti-immigrant policies such as the building of “the Wall” on the Mexican border (Winston, 2017; Guidos, 2019). In many western European countries, this clash over immigration policy has been supplemented by historical animosities towards anti-immigrant movements within the Christian communities, which often perceived the former as neo-pagan and neo-fascist parties inherently hostile to Christianity (Marzouki et al., 2016). Subsequent attempts by anti-immigrant politicians’ to present themselves as defenders of secularism or gay rights against the allegedly backwards religious values of Islam have not improved relations but added new tensions about religious freedom, church-state relations and even about societal issues such as gay marriage or abortion (Roy, 2019).

Finally, some church leaders have publicly taken issue with the far rights’ culturalisation of Christian symbols itself. The president of the Lutheran World Association Bishop Christian Krause, for instance, has publicly called the anti-immigrant parties’ identitarian references to Christianity as “perverted” (Die Welt, 2015). Meanwhile, American faith leaders have openly condemned Donald Trump’s photo stunts of holding a Bible into the cameras during the BLM
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protests as “outrageous”, “baffling” and “reprehensible”, with the Episcopal Bishop of Washington, DC, Mariann Budde lamenting that Trump “used our symbols and our sacred space as a way to reinforce a message that is antithetical to everything that the person of Jesus and the Gospel texts represent” (Chappell, 2020). Anti-immigrant parties’ leaders themselves have been candid about this discrepancy between their own identitarian conception of Christianity and that of the churches. French far-right leader Éric Zemmour, for instance, has declared to be “for Christendom but against Christ” (Lindell, 2022), while AfD leader Alexander Gauland clarified that his party was “not a Christian party” and references to Christianity were meant primarily to honour the heritage of “the faith of our fathers” (F.A.Z., 2016). Yet, even though some faith leaders have challenged such an identitarian re-interpretation of Christianity, their flock’s reactions vis-à-vis anti-immigrant parties’ references to religion are far from uniform and vary particularly between both sides of the Atlantic.

Comparing Christian reactions to anti-immigrant movements and religion in western Europe and the US (1854)

In the twenty-first century, there has been a stark contrast between religious communities’ responses to anti-immigrant parties between western Europe and the US. While in the US record numbers (81%) of white evangelicals, as well as majorities of white mainline Protestants (58%) and Catholics (64%) voted for Donald Trump in 2016 (Smith and Martinez, 2016), and an “evangelical advisory board” of conservative Christian leaders was set up in the Trump White House, in western Europe organised Christianity has often emerged as a formidable bulwark against anti-immigrant parties. European church leaders, for instance, have vocally and consistently opposed anti-immigrant parties’ politics, and Christian voters – especially those who regularly attend church – have historically voted for anti-immigrant parties at much lower rates than their secular compatriots, so much so that scholars speak of a “religion gap” or “religious immunity” among Christian voters against anti-immigrant parties (Montgomery and Winter, 2015; Cremer, 2021a; Siegers and Jedinger, 2021). To better understand the sources of this transatlantic divide, it is important to look at developments within Christian communities and anti-immigrant parties, as well as at external factors such as electoral alternatives, or the structural settlement of church-state relations.

One widespread account of why American Christians appear more supportive of anti-immigrant politicians than their European brethren is that they would hold more nativist attitudes. Specifically, scholars have identified “White Christian Nationalism” as a powerful factor linking Christian self-identification with nativism, authoritarian attitudes and support for Donald Trump (Whitehead and Perry, 2020). However, attitudes alone may be insufficient to account for the discrepancy between European and American Christians’ reactions towards anti-immigrant parties. For one, because trends in Christians’ attitudes on both sides of the Atlantic have actually been more comparable than often assumed. For instance, in the 2000s and 2010s both American and European Christians continued to be more conservative than their secular neighbours on social issues like abortion, gay rights or religious freedom, but were becoming more open on identitarian questions such as immigration, race relations or Islam (Immerzeel et al., 2013; Ekins, 2018; More in Common, 2018; Melkonian-Hoover and Kellstedt, 2019). In Europe some studies suggest that practicing Christians may actually be more open towards immigration or Islam than their secular neighbours, which may help explain their historical “immunity” towards anti-immigrant parties (Arzheimer and Carter, 2009; Immerzeel et al., 2013).

Despite their subsequent support for Donald Trump, there is evidence of a similar divergence on the core issue of immigration between Christians and Trumpism in the US.
Thus, while under the aegis of Steve Bannon, Trump’s team explicitly picked up on European anti-immigrant parties’ “identitarian” rhetoric, directly referenced thinkers and concepts of the Nouvelle Droite, and painted the election as a civilisational struggle for America’s (white) cultural identity. America’s Christian communities had actually started to evolve in the opposite direction in the early twenty-first century (Sides et al., 2019; Haynes, 2020; Rose, 2021). Scholars like Ruth Melkonian-Hoover and Lyman Kellstedt (2019) have stressed, for instance, that between 2011 and 2018, just as anti-immigrant sentiment surged among Trump’s base of secular conservatives, American evangelicals “increased their support [for immigration] over time” (p. 58; see also Ekins, 2018). And even studies identifying white Christian nationalist attitudes as a key driver for Trump’s success show that religious practice often correlates with greater openness towards immigrants, more positive attitudes towards racial minorities and higher levels of tolerance towards religious minorities (Whitehead and Perry, 2020, p. 143). These trends seem reinforced by the changing demographic make-up of American congregations. Thus, as white Americans have disproportionately turned away from organised religion in the US, ethnic minorities and immigrants have often become the main source of vitality for many Christian denominations. This is not only true for American Catholicism, in which non-white people are already a majority among millennials, but also for American evangelicals, 40% of whom self-identified as non-white according to some studies (LifeWay, 2017).

However, these demographic and attitudinal trends in American Christianity clearly did not translate into a European-style “religious immunity” against anti-immigrant politics. To understand why, it is important to examine the evolution of the relationship between Trumpism and America’s Christian communities. For although the US is often presented as a prime example of an alliance – or even a fusion – of anti-immigrant Trumpism and Christian conservatism, this development was not a matter of course. Instead, initially conservative Christians were among the most hesitant parts of the Republican electorate to rally behind Trump. During the 2016 GOP primary, for instance, Trump performed best among those primary voters who never attend church (62% of whom voted for him), whereas he did worst among most frequent church attendees (32%) (Carney, 2019, p. 121). Similarly, most representatives of the evangelical “establishment” initially opposed Trump’s candidacy, with the evangelical flagship magazine Christianity Today running editorials against him and evangelical leaders like Russell Moore and others publicly condemning his politics (Moore, 2015; Crouch, 2016). According to a survey of the National Association of Evangelicals, this animosity also extended to faith leaders on the ground (NAE, 2015).

By the presidential election, however, Trump had been able to overcome Christian voters’ reservations and to rally them behind him in record numbers. One argument that is often brought up to explain this shift is that Trump had been able strike a “transactional bargain” with the Christian right by catering to their core priorities on abortion, LGBTQ rights or religious freedom. During the primaries, the formerly pro-choice businessman had referenced such issues much less often than his Republican competitors. However, once he became the Republican nominee Trump shifted course and promised to appoint pro-life supreme court judges, chose evangelical stalwart Mike Pence his running mate, and said that religious freedom would be a key priority of his administration. This policy distinguished Trump from many of his western European counterparts who used Christian symbols and language, but openly kept their distance from Christian values, beliefs and institutions (Marzouki et al., 2016). However, when trying to understand the sources of Christians’ varying reactions to the far right, perhaps even more important than the latter’s strategies may have been the religious and political context in which European and American parties operated.
Several studies have found, for instance, that a key reason for why European Christians have remained comparatively immune to anti-immigrant parties’ appeals is neither the formers’ attitudes nor the latter’s strategies, but the political competition and in particular the presence of a credible “Christian alternative” in the party system (Montgomery and Winter, 2015; Siegers and Jedinger, 2021). The logic here is that religious immunity is indirect and rests on the mechanism that in countries with strong Christian democratic parties, Christian voters are, as Arzheimer and Carter put it, simply “not available” to these (anti-immigrant) parties, because they are still firmly attached to Christian Democratic or Conservative parties” (Arzheimer and Carter, 2009, p. 985). In the cases of Germany, the Netherlands or Italy, for instance, the existence of powerful Christian democratic parties, which maintained ownership over key Christian issues and provided a political home for Christian voters, has been referenced as a key explanatory variable for the historical strength of the religious immunization effect against the far right (Siegers and Jedinger, 2021). In the US, by contrast, party loyalty seemed to have played an opposite role by allowing Trump to attract many initially sceptical Christian voters due to their long-standing attachment to “God’s Own Party”. For instance, 38% of white evangelical Trump voters, for instance, said that they supported him primarily because he was the Republican nominee, compared with only 13% of irreligious Trump supporters (Smith, 2016). Moreover, in a two-party system like the American system, negative partisanship may have played a similarly important role with 76% of white evangelicals stating that the “major reason” for supporting Donald Trump in 2016 was that “he is not Hillary Clinton” (Smith, 2016; Abramowitz and Webster, 2018).

In addition to the party system, another key contextual factor is the structure of the religious landscape and the institutional settlement of church-state relations. For instance, there is some research suggesting that in Europe’s highly stratified religious landscapes, where the dominant Christian denominations have historically been (or in some cases still are) established national churches, faith leaders were both more willing and more able to speak out against anti-immigrant parties than in America’s unregulated religious market square (Cremer, 2021b). Specifically, American faith leaders appear to more frequently have muted their criticism out of concerns over losing followers or donations on which their economic survival often depended, whereas in Europe’s churches in which clergy tend to be primarily religious superiors, such pressures were much less important. Furthermore, the lack of hierarchies and of clearly identifiable “official representatives” of Christianity in the US also meant that it was more difficult for American religious elites to be “heard” in their criticisms in the same ways their European counterparts were.

This is important because research suggests that one crucial source of electoral immunity against anti-immigrant parties are social taboos created by elites (Douglas, 2003; de Jonge, 2019). Eric Kaufmann, for instance, describes how the erosion of the “bounds of acceptable debate over immigration can set off the spiral of populist-right mobilisation” and how elite actors play a crucial role in either maintaining or eroding such social bounds (Kaufmann, 2018, p. 218). This mechanism may be particularly powerful in the case of religious communities, because of religious institutions’ traditional role in defining social norms as well as because psychologists have shown religious individuals tend to be more susceptible to social taboos (Haidt, 2012). As a result, in most European countries a relatively small number of leaders of the highly stratified and historically dominant denominations seemed to be able to effectively create powerful social firewalls against anti-immigrant parties by openly condemning anti-immigrant parties’ policies (Cremer, 2021a). By contrast, in America’s unregulated religious marketplace, there was no clearly identifiable group of leaders that could ex officio condemn Trumpism with the same normative authority. As a result, even if many members of America’s religious
“establishment” may have been more critical of Trump’s anti-immigrant agenda, their normative ability to create a social taboo around it has been limited. Taken together, these differing strategies of anti-immigrant politicians, as well as the structure of the party system and religious landscape are important explanatory variables in understanding Christians’ varying reactions to anti-immigrant movements on both sides of the Atlantic.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to examine the ambiguous relationship between anti-immigrant parties and religion in Western Europe and the US. Specifically, it addressed the questions of why anti-immigrant parties have intensified references to religion at a time of rapid secularisation, and how religious communities themselves have responded to this development. From the analysis of the socio-demographic roots behind anti-immigrant parties’ electoral successes, the ways in which religion features in anti-immigrant parties’ politics, and the responses of Christian communities on both sides of the Atlantic, several insights emerge. First, anti-immigrant parties’ electoral success appears to be fuelled less by any sort of religious revival in the West, than by the emergence of new social cleavage centred on the question of identity, which in fact appears connected to the very erosion of traditional religious and class identities through the processes of globalisation, individualisation and secularisation. Second, to appeal to this new social cleavage, anti-immigrant parties have used their own brand of right-wing identity politics, which focuses on civilisational and identitarian rather than on economic or racial forms of othering. In this context anti-immigrant parties are referencing neo-paganism, secularism but in particular Christianity primarily as a cultural identity marker against Islam, while remaining distanced from religious values, beliefs and institutions. And fourth, Christian communities’ reactions to these references vary widely depending not only on anti-immigrant parties’ strategies but also on the political and religious structures in which they operate as well as on the behaviour of religious and political elites. Overall, these findings suggest that as trends like secularisation, individualisation and rapid ethnic change continue and as the identity cleavage increases in salience, references to both identitarian Christianism and exclusivist secularism as cultural anti-dotes to the “Islamic Other” will only become more prominent in anti-immigrant rhetoric. However, rather than being driven by any form of religious resurgence, anti-immigrant parties and their religiously laden rhetoric appear to be both symptoms and harbingers of the further secularisation of Western politics as the latter transitions from the class struggles and religious culture wars of the twentieth century to a new more secular identity politics of the twenty-first century.

Note

1 Social cleavages, thereby, denote the main social conflict lines that divide the population into social groups and according to which party systems are structured (compare Bartolini and Mair, 2007, pp. 199–202).

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Religion and anti-immigration parties in the West


