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Roberto Blancarte

**Populism, Religion, and Secularity
in Latin America and Europe**
A Comparative Perspective

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Populism, Religion, and Secularity in Latin America and Europe

A Comparative Perspective

1 Introduction

So much has been written in the past few decades about populism that most scholars approaching the subject feel obliged to begin by justifying their writing of yet another text. In this paper, the situation is somewhat different: whilst our analytical gaze is cast upon populism (and fascism, as a precursor or closely related social phenomenon), this is only indirectly the case.¹ Our primary focus is, instead, on the relationship that populism has with religion and secularity. Or, more precisely, the relationships of diverse populisms with different religiosities and various secularities. While the religious and the secular are mentioned in numerous studies about populism, these topics have rarely been adequately elaborated. Even when they are discussed, they are treated only in a marginal way.² The purpose of this work is, therefore, to highlight the complex and multi-faceted way that populisms in Europe and Latin America have related to religion and religiosity. A second, parallel

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- 1 The bibliography on populism is enormous. Some of the works that have guided me are: Manuel Anselmi, *Populism: An Introduction (Key Ideas)* (London: Routledge, 2018); Cas Mudde, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017); Cas Mudde, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, eds., *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); John Bellamy Foster, “This is not Populism,” *Monthly Review – An Independent Socialist Magazine* 69, no. 2 (2017); Karl Aiginger, “Populism: Root Causes, Power Grabbing and Counter Strategy,” *Intereconomics* 55, no. 1 (2020); New York Times Editorial Staff, eds. *Populism* (New York, NY: New York Times Educational Publishing, 2019); Annie Collovald, “Populisme,” *Quaderni* 63 (2007); Paul Marschall, and Stephan Klingebiel, “Populism: Consequences for Global Sustainable Development,” Briefing Paper 8, Bonn, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, 2019; Jan-Werner Müller, “Populism and the Claim to a Moral Monopoly,” interviewed by Niels Boel, Carsten Jensen, and André Sonnichsen, *Politik* 20, no. 4 (2017).
 - 2 Two examples of this are: Michael Hoelzl, “The New Visibility of Religion and Its Impact on Populist Politics,” *Religions* 11, no. 6 (2020), where he focuses on the incompatibilities of religion and theology with populism, and Walter Lesch, “Visible Religion and Populism: An Explosive Cocktail,” *Religions* 11, no. 8 (2020).

objective of this work is to reflect on the particular relationships populism establishes with different understandings of the secular, specifically within the political sphere, i.e. ‘political secularity.’ Following the differentiation paradigm, another term one might see used for this is ‘laicity’ (*laïcité* in French, *laicidad* in Spanish). I understand this to refer specifically to the secularisation of the state and the areas of society which come under its control. The best example of the latter is education, insofar as public schools exist, or as the programmes of private schools are regulated by the state. Public health is another good example.

Populism is not a new social phenomenon, either in Europe or Latin America. It has been present in both continents, albeit with varying characteristics, since at least the early 20th century, with precursor manifestations (that one might label ‘proto-populisms’) in Russia and the US at the end of the 19th century.³ Some characteristics are common to current politicians and their political parties or movements on both sides of the Atlantic: anti-globalism, nationalism, nativism, protectionism, anti-migrant and xenophobic discourse, and other elements of a political culture based in anti-liberal, anti-democratic and isolationist ideals.

There has also been a long debate around the diffusion and re-appropriation of fascist ideology among closely related political movements, such as Germany’s Nazism or Spain’s Francoism.⁴ It is not the purpose of this paper, however, to participate in this enlightening and captivating discussion. We instead want to emphasise the ideological kinship between fascism and populism, and the current repercussions of that link.

3 See some of the articles that were published on the subject at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, edited by the New York Times Editorial Staff, such as Harold Williams, “Bolshevism seen as New Religion,” Petrograd, January 9, 1918,” in *Populism*, 39–42 (New York, NY: New York Times Educational Publishing, 2019).

4 Renzo De Felice, often considered to have been the pre-eminent scholar of fascism, highlighted the need for analysis of this issue: It is time, he said, “to establish once and for all what we understand by fascism. We must elaborate a model to which we can refer with reasonable certainty; and decide whether we may consider it a unique phenomenon dictated by a particular historical moment in specific countries, determined by contingent and non-repeatable circumstances, or whether, instead, it should be considered one of the possible forms of socio-political organisation of mass societies in a specific stage of their development,” *Le interpretazione del fascismo*, 2nd ed. (Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 1995), 17. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Spanish, French, Portuguese, German and Italian are my own.

On the other side of the Atlantic, there is also debate about the historical connection between regimes that developed after the fall of either oligarchical or imperial regimes in Latin America and Europe. This process began with the fall of the Brazilian Empire in 1889, continued with the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1929, and was deepened by the Great War and the Great Depression. Fascism and Nazism in Europe were, evidently, a consequence of these latter social tremors. Similarly, the fall of the oligarchical regimes in Latin America brought about massive social and economic change, an upheaval which resulted in a surge of national-Catholic populist regimes in countries such as Brazil or Argentina. Equally, just as fascism advanced in Europe, Mexico developed its own form of populist corporatism, in which all productive sectors (peasants, labourers, or even small entrepreneurs) were almost compulsorily affiliated to the official national party after 1929. Although Europe and Latin America saw a divergence in the outcomes of such social movements, as a result of the Second World War and the specificity of national political cultures, their socio-political configuration remained nonetheless related. After 1945, Latin America's populist 'first wave' expanded and strengthened, while European neo-fascism was left to linger several decades in obscurity, before it could later re-emerge under more favourable political circumstances. We can thus advance the idea that this social phenomenon started in Europe, travelled to Latin America, where it established its own political culture, and then re-blossomed in Europe, connecting the extreme right and populist neo-fascism. In this regard, everything centred around the vague and nebulous concept of 'the people.'⁵

Religion has played an ambiguous role in populist regimes. It has been frequently used as an identity tool, to establish a national culture and to reject others who are seen as 'foreign intrusions' or 'internal enemies.' Even the most 'secular populisms' have had a complex and ambivalent relationship with religious groups and institutions, using them politically, and integrating them into their ideological schemes. Populists have established both formal and informal alliances with religious groups and institutions, though these pacts have mostly ended in open conflict.

5 An example of theoretical discussions around this concept is the work of post-

Nevertheless, according to most scholars, populism presents itself as a 'good' moral force, detached from institutional religion, set against an elite which is perceived as corrupt and self-serving. It introduces a binary worldview, in which everything is divided into friends and foes, allies and enemies, with no room for intermediate positions. Those that are viewed as enemies are not attributed valid positions or different priorities; they are the evil and the corrupt, to be decimated or eliminated. Morality and religion tend to be travel companions. But in most cases populist regimes end up at least attempting to substitute traditional religious institutions with a form of government based on a new 'moral order.' Whether this situation is particular to populism, or an essential element of the modern (Western or not) state, is a matter of debate.⁶

In our comparative perspective, at first glance we can observe that European populist political leaders such as Boris Johnson, Matteo Salvini, Marine Le Pen, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, and Victor Orbán have many characteristics in common with Jair Bolsonaro, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Evo Morales, Hugo Chávez, or Nicolás Maduro in Latin America. They have reintroduced the religious or the sacred into the sphere of the state in various ways, as a consequence of either sincere religious belief or cynical political calculation. In this regard, identitarianism may drive an unequal treatment of religions: for example, an appeal is made to a Christian past, and against an 'invasion' of Muslims. In most cases this reintroduction has meant a new approach to the role of religion in politics, although not necessarily through traditional churches. It has instead mostly involved an individualised religion, emerging from a process of 'bricolage,' in which a variety of religious traditions are recycled and remixed, then presented and utilised as a new legitimising force. This can, paradoxically, be seen as either a secular or post-secular trend (depending on how we define those concepts): society is continuously secularised, whilst the state is colonised by religion. The reintroduction also leads us

Marxist Lacanian Ernesto Laclau, especially influential in Latin America; particularly his book *La razón populista* [On Populist Reason] (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2005).

6 I make reference here to the notion of biopolitics, from Foucault's works on 'biopower,' which is the application of power to 'biological' aspects of human life. According to this idea, modern states would then be the substitute for traditional religions, in their regulation of the human body.

to the idea of the sacredness of the state, the leader, or the people, which become substitutes for institutional religions, as well as to the complex relationship between traditional religions and the new populist leaders or movements, as there is a transfer of the sacred.⁷

In Latin America, populism displays other political characteristics, particularly ‘clientelism’ (exchanging political support for material goods), which creates political dependence, particularly in electoral terms. This leads to an ‘infantilising’ of the most marginal and fragile social sectors, and paternalistic postures. The ‘good people’ must be led and protected from evil agents who cause them harm. In many cases, this results in the emergence of ‘caudillism’ (from *caudillo*, a term for a strongman leader) or messianic tendencies. The leader appeals to religious or sacred sources to legitimise his power, becoming a kind of ‘high priest’ – pronouncing moral judgements at the same time as running the civil aspects of government.

In Europe, religion’s role in populism is somewhat different. Antisemitism and Islamophobia have transformed the secular landscape, reintroducing the historical role of Christianity into societal discourse. This has fuelled a reconsideration of identity and pluralism; populists have even questioned the role of democratic institutions. Furthermore, nationalism and isolationism have shaken the authority of traditional religions, and transformed the whole political culture of many countries. Though Western European societies appear to be secularised, and beyond direct intervention from religious institutions, the ‘religious’ factor still seems to play a role on the level of identity, and provides an unrecognised reference with regard to public morality. In other words, ‘religion’ now appears covertly in the form of moral standing.

7 ‘Religious’ and ‘sacred’ are related concepts but are not synonyms. Durkheim, in his classical book, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Quadrigue Grands Texts (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960), explained – briefly put – that religions are communal beliefs transformed into social cohesive institutions, while the sacred is that which is considered separate from or above everything else. That is why an animal, a concept (the fatherland) or a person (the leader) can be sacralised. This basic distinction is important for identifying the possibility of sacred secular (non-religious) things, persons, or regimes. Durkheim connects the ideas of religion and the sacred, in defining religion as: “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires*, 65.

Thus far, this paper has treated concepts such as religion, secularity, and laicity only vaguely. They all require more formal definition in order to understand this article's proposals.

I understand 'religion' in a predominantly Durkheimian way which can be summarised with the phrase 'religion is society.' As the French sociologist explained in his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, societies cannot exist or reproduce themselves without the creation of an ideal.⁸ In order to maintain their cohesion, they therefore produce what we have labelled as 'religion.' That is why we can understand a wide variety of new social phenomena as 'religious' (from Durkheim's civil religion, to beliefs in intelligent extra-terrestrial life connected to chosen groups on Earth, to an emotional gathering) even if it doesn't follow the traditional understanding of such. If it creates social cohesion through recurrent emotion around an ideal, in a certain group, and through a set of repeated rituals, then it may be called a religion.

I understand, as many of my colleagues do, secularity and secularisation as the continuous outcome of a process of differentiation between the spheres of life, which were, at a certain point, both undifferentiated from, and dominated by, the religious perspective. Through this differentiation, these spheres then developed as autonomous in terms of values and modes of action. For the purposes of this research, it is immaterial whether this process began at the moment that Jews established a covenant with God, in the Axial Age, or when Martin Luther (supposedly) nailed his 95 theses at Wittenberg's Castle Church, or indeed at any other moment in history. The point here is that, as Olivier Tschannen explained in an article published almost 30 years ago, the nucleus of the secularisation paradigm contains three basic elements: rationalisation, differentiation and worldliness, with differentiation being the most important of all.⁹ A few years later, José Casanova confirmed in his seminal work that "the thesis of the differentiation of religious and secular spheres is the still defensible core of the theory of secularisation."¹⁰

Nevertheless, if we follow not only a Durkheimian but also a Weberian understanding of the relationship between the religious and the secular

8 Durkheim, 603.

9 Olivier Tschannen, "The Secularization Paradigm: A Systematization," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30, no. 4 (1991).

10 José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 6–7.

spheres, we can also understand how religion has produced, and is still able to produce, the secular. We also see that the secular is permanently ‘swamped’ by the religious, generating a permanent tendency towards sacralisation in society. There is a long tradition of scholars who, without rejecting the differentiation of society, speak of the secular aspects produced by a specific set of religious ethics and, ultimately, of secularisation as a religious change. Max Weber, for example, refers to Judaism understanding the world as “a historical product,” and developing a highly rational set of religious ethics, which “still underlies the contemporary European and Middle Eastern religious ethic.”¹¹ His famous work on protestant ethics is a clear theoretical exercise designed to show the impact of religious ethics in the economic sphere.¹² Peter Berger follows the Weberian explanation, considering the Western religious tradition (initiated by Israel and transmitted through Christianity) to carry “the seed of secularisation.”¹³ Other authors consider this relationship bi-directionally. Karel Dobbelaere wrote about secularisation as a multi-dimensional concept, with religious change and religious involvement included as expressions of the phenomenon. While religious involvement “refers to individual behaviour and measures the degree of normative integration in religious bodies,” religious change “expresses change occurring in the posture of religious organisation – churches, denominations and sects – in matters of belief, morals and rituals, and implies also a study of the decline *and emergence* of religious groups.”¹⁴ Instead of understanding secularisation as a religious pathology to be measured by the shrinking reach of the churches, Dobbelaere explains, a focus on emergent forms of religiosity (for example, the so-called ‘new religious movements’) enabled an understanding of secularisation as a process of religious change.¹⁵ In the same theoretical vein that views secularisation not as a phenomenon completely separated from religion, but rather as both a product and a producer of it, Danièle Hervieu-Léger states:

11 Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (Tübingen: UTB, 1988 [1921]), 1:6.

12 Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, 1:17–206.

13 Peter Berger, *Para una teoría sociológica de la religión* [The Sacred Canopy], 2nd ed. (Barcelona: Editorial Kairós, 1967), 159.

14 Karel Dobbelaere, “Secularization: A Multi-dimensional Concept,” *Current Sociology* 29, no. 2 (1981): 12 (emphasis mine).

15 Dobbelaere, “Secularization,” 4.

we must understand that secularisation is not the disappearance of religion in the modern world. It is the ensemble of processes of rearrangement of beliefs, which are produced in a society whose propulsive engine is the non-fulfilment of expectations that it provokes, and whose daily condition is the uncertainty tied to the interminable quest for the means to satisfy it.¹⁶

The entanglement is easier to understand and to differentiate, when we understand that the religious and the secular are distinct but also permanently interrelated: a two-way street producing specific arrangements in which ‘the religious’ is still present – either as civil religion, political religion, or diverse forms of sacralisation of the secular – whilst the ‘the secular’ transforms religion or produces rearrangements of beliefs. In some cases, the new forms of religiosity seem subordinated to a secular social logic. More rarely in our contemporary society, the religious aspects may become predominant. This does not eliminate or diminish the thesis of the differentiation of spheres. On the contrary, it helps us to explain the complexity and the variation in time and space of those arrangements. Here I will focus on the creation of political religions, and the process of sacralising secular entities, such as ‘the people.’

Thirdly, we have the concept of ‘laicity,’ which is mainly used in ‘Latin’ countries, where the Catholic church was religiously monopolistic and politically powerful, and in certain ways is still culturally hegemonic. The concept has, in many cases, been used as a synonym for ‘secularity,’ but, as mentioned before, I will limit its use to the political sphere of the secularisation process. As has been the case for secularity, the concept of laicity has been much debated, particularly in France, but also in Mexico, Québec, and Turkey.¹⁷ In previous work, I proposed a definition centred on the changing legitimation of political authority, which could be explained through the transition from sacred to democratic (understood to denote

16 Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Le pèlerin et le converti: La religion en mouvement* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999), 42. In fact, Hervieu-Léger proposed this thesis in the 1980s in her book *Vers un nouveau christianisme? Introduction à la sociologie du christianisme occidental* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1986), 198.

17 In 2005, three scholars from France (Jean Baubérot), Canada (Micheline Milot) and Mexico (myself) wrote the pompously titled “Universal Declaration of Laicity/Secularity in XXI Century,” to facilitate a common denominator in the comprehension of the concept, beyond our different cultural and historical approaches to it. The declaration was endorsed by many colleagues and has been translated into several languages. An English version of the declaration can be found at: <https://vancouver.sun.com/news/staff-blogs/universal-declaration-on-secularism>

popular sovereignty) sources of political legitimacy: “Laicity is a regime of social coexistence, whose political institutions are mainly legitimated by popular sovereignty, and no longer by sacred or religious sources.”¹⁸ Laicisation is therefore the secularisation of the state (political sphere), but also of cultural, scientific and educational institutions, insofar as the state exerts authority over those realms (public health and public education being typical examples). The ‘lay state’ is then a political-juridical instrument serving liberty, in a society that recognises itself as plural and diverse. The advantages of this definition of laicity are that it clearly formulates the secularisation or laicisation of the political sphere as a process centred on the changing legitimacy of political authority, that it does so without a specific beginning or end, that it does not follow a specific model (such as the French one), and that it relates clearly to modern democracy (through the concept of popular sovereignty or popular will). It also shows that, like democracy, laicisation can never be fully attained, and can always be reversed. Just as democratisation is never complete, the transition from sacred to ‘peoples’ sovereignty’ forms of legitimacy of power is never finished. At least a remnant of the sacred remains, in even the most secular societies, as even the lay state tends to sacralise itself. Laicity should thus be understood to not refer to a full and complete separation between the state and religious institutions. This definition allows us to recognise the complexity of the process of laicisation in many countries. This is particularly relevant in countries where, in spite of formal separation, the Catholic church and some evangelical churches are still politically influential. Equally, many countries house regimes that either ignore the idea of separation between religion and politics, or reject the concept of the autonomy of the state from a particular religion or philosophical doctrine. In other cases, even though institutional religion does not directly govern politics, its moral codes still play a role. This is, in any case, the general conceptual framework in which we situate our research.

18 Roberto Blancarte, ed., *Laicidad y valores en un Estado democrático* (México: El Colegio de México – Secretaría de Gobernación, 2000).

2 Fascism

Is populism related to fascism? Or was fascism a unique social phenomenon that should not be conflated with other socio-political developments?

In his book on the interpretations of fascism, Renzo De Felice mentions several conditions that have been variously advanced as causes of fascism: weakness of the liberal-democratic tradition, deficiencies of the political and bureaucratic classes, nationalism, the desire for strong government resulting from a limited socio-political conscience, the moral crisis of European society, late processes of economic development and national unification, a final stage of imperialist capitalism, the product of class struggle, etc.¹⁹ He insisted on the need to observe fascism as a modern phenomenon, but, at the same time, following Ernst Cassirer, to recognise its mythic quality:

Pre-modern in many aspects, fascism has, nevertheless in many other senses been a typically modern phenomenon [...] perhaps the most modern among those that have characterised the first half of our century, in the way in which it has intuitively sensed the enormous potentiality of mythical power in a transitional crisis, and used it to exert political power over the masses.²⁰

The reference to mythical power is not accidental. It points to a central characteristic of fascism, as well as of certain populist regimes. De Felice established a typology of the forms of power of the fascist phenomenon. According to him, fascism imposes itself through: 1) A *mystical* (my emphasis) conception of politics and of life in general. This is based in the principle of irrational activism (trust in direct and revolutionary action), and the denigration of the common individual set against an exaltation of the national collectivity and of extraordinary personalities (elites and the *Übermensch*). From this exaltation descended the myth – essential in fascism – of the *capo* (leader). 2) A political regime of the masses (in the sense of a continual mobilisation of the masses, and a direct relationship between the leader and the masses, without intermediaries) based on a one-party system and a party militia. The authority of the regime is enforced through a police state, and through the regime taking control of all sources of information and

19 De Felice, *Le interpretazione del fascismo*, 293. See also, by the same author, *Breve storia del fascismo*, con i due saggi “Il problema dell’identità nazionale” e “Dall’eredità di Adua all’intervento” (Milano: Mondadori, 2018 [2000]), 148.

20 De Felice, *Le interpretazione del fascismo*, xxi.

propaganda. 3) A verbally revolutionary standing, coupled with a substantial conservatism mitigated by a series of social welfare measures. 4) A desire to create a new ruling class, existing as an expression of the party and, therefore, of the petty and middle bourgeoisie. 5) The creation and valorisation of a strong military apparatus. 6) An economic regime based on private enterprise, but characterised by a tendency towards the expansion of the public sector, by a shift in economic control from capitalists and entrepreneurs to high functionaries of the state, and by state control of the major aspects of economic policy. The latter includes taking an increasing role as a mediator in labour controversies (corporatism), and a trend towards autarky.²¹

There exist, of course, many other descriptions and interpretations of the fascist phenomenon. What I want to emphasise here is the mythical, quasi-religious aura or open sacralisation of fascist leadership on the one hand, and, on the other, the central role of the leader himself, with his direct relationship with the masses.

There are, in fact, several ways of understanding the relationship that fascism had with religion or with the sacred in general. Some scholars have advanced the idea of a close relationship between fascism and a certain type of religiosity. In the case of Italy, the relationship between the Catholic church, specifically the Holy See, and the fascist regime has already been thoroughly studied, and dissecting this relationship is not the objective of our research. Let us therefore mention only the Lateran Treaty of 1929 as the high point of the entente between them. In more concrete terms, as Giordano Bruno Guerri explains:

The solidarity between fascism and the Vatican cannot come as a surprise even whilst fascism promoted itself as a religion. The Church and the regime had in common the same set of enemies: democracy, liberalism, communism, freemasonry. The authoritarian and mystifying model that Mussolini wanted corresponded to that desired by the Church.²²

We will later observe similar features in the connection between institutional religion and the political regime in modern populist regimes, which generate a similarly ambiguous relationship between them.

²¹ De Felice, 24–25.

²² Giordano B. Guerri, *Antistoria degli italiani: Da Romolo a Giovanni Paolo II* (Milano: Mondadori, 1997), 313.

Fascism's relationship with religion extended beyond the domain of institutional beliefs. There is a stronger connection to the concept of neo-pagan sacredness of 'secular' regimes.²³ An abundant bibliography already exists around the idea of a political religiosity of the fascist political experiment.²⁴ I would like to emphasise this as one of the characteristics that populism has inherited from fascism, as we will later observe.

"We strive to translate into reality that which was Giuseppe Mazzini's aspiration: to give Italians 'the religious concept of their own nation,'" said Mussolini in December 1920.²⁵ The fascist leader had long expressed the need for a religious belief in spiritual-secular values, even in his period as a socialist: "Humanity needs a credo. It is faith that moves mountains because it gives the illusion that mountains move. Illusion is perhaps the only reality in life."²⁶ Mussolini himself represents the typical politician that will evolve in populist contexts: whilst personally a non-believer, and even furiously anticlerical, he does not hesitate to make pragmatic concessions and compromises with institutional religion when necessary. In the long run, he nonetheless maintains an open dispute with religion over the organisation of society, as eventually the political regime will seek to control all forms of social organisation, including those (for example, youth organisations) of the religious institutions.

Guerri, explains this transformation of a civil religion into a political religion²⁷:

23 Richard Steigman-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), discusses the vast bibliography on this subject in the introduction.

24 See, for example, Michael Burleigh's trilogy, *The Third Reich: A New History; Earthly Powers: The Conflict between Religion and Politics from the French Revolution to the Great War*, and *Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics from the Great War to the War on Terror*.

25 Quoted from Guerri, *Antistoria degli italiani*, 278.

26 Guerri, 281.

27 The concept of civil religion, initially proposed by Jean-Jaques Rousseau, and later variously revised by Émile Durkheim and others, relates to a substitution of traditional religious symbols and values for civic or patriotic symbols and secular values. See Jean-Jaques Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social, écrits politiques*, vol. 3 of *Oeuvres complètes*, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 460–70. Émile Durkheim referred to the French Revolution, and how many things were "by nature" transformed into sacred things by public opinion: "la Patrie, la Liberté, la Raison" ('fatherland, liberty, reason'), Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires*, 305. The French sociologist Raymond Aron, spoke of "secular religions" (*religions*

An evaluation of the religious *crescendo* of fascism is possible even through the work of the secretaries of the Party, diverse in personalities and purposes, but all working towards the sacralisation of the regime. Roberto Farinacci (Secretary in 1925-1926) talks about the Dominican faith of fascism, to justify the depuration-inquisition of the dissidents-heretics. Augusto Turati (1926-1930) affirmed the need to “believe in fascism, in the Duce, in the Revolution, as one believes in Divinity.” And to accept “these dogmas, even if it’s shown that they are wrong [...] without discussion.” Turati diffused a true catechism of “fascist doctrine” that was synthesised into the motto “Believe, Obey, Combat” under his successor Giovanni Giurati (1930-1931), who was particularly attentive to youth formation. Finally, Achille Starace (1931-1939) codified the religious liturgy of the regime with a maniacal rigor, intensifying it up to the grotesque.²⁸

Not every mention of religion or religiosity should be taken as granting its existence a new form. There are, of course, multiple metaphors or metonymies. But we must take into consideration the creation of new beliefs, even though they come in secular disguise. We should consider their capacity to create and recreate an ideal that enables a particular group or society to maintain a certain consistency, and to reproduce itself.²⁹ We do not have the space here to develop this argument, which has, at any rate, already been successfully expanded elsewhere. It is our purpose only to insist on the religious aspect of fascism, coming either from the cult of the leader, or from the new civil or political faith that the regime

laïques). Robert Bellah, following the Durkheimian interpretation, wrote about the concept of “transcendent universal religion of the nation,” in an article titled “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967). The concept of political religion also deals with substitution of religion, particularly by totalitarian antireligious forms of faith. The term’s use was extended in the 1930s by the German professor (exiled in the USA) Eric Voegelin, as an explanation of the Communist and Nazi regimes. For a history of the concept, see the introduction in Michael Burleigh’s book, *Earthly Powers: The Conflict between Religion and Politics from the French Revolution to the Great War* (London: Harper Press, 2005). The relationship between both concepts is still a matter of discussion.

28 Guerri, *Antistoria degli italiani*, 281.

29 An example of this point can be seen in an early description of bolshevism. In an article written for the New York Times in January 1918, Harold Williams responded positively to the observations of one writer, who saw bolshevism as a new religion, comparing its form “as a mass movement with early Christianity.” Williams insisted: “there certainly are points of semblance, for instance in the fanatical sectarianism and the apocalyptic tendency.” Harold Williams, “Bolshevism Seen as New Religion,” 39–42.

promoted among its followers. Finally, there is also the aspect of social mobilisation and corporatisation, where this new faith faced and collided with institutional and established faiths. We will return to this idea when we examine populism and its conflicts with organised religion.

3 Populism

What aspects of its relationships with religion and secularity did populism inherit from fascism? Once again, the debate about the relationship between fascism and populism is not new. We will instead concentrate on the continuities between the two social phenomena regarding their relationship with religion and the secular. Based on his historical analysis, Federico Finchelstein has proposed that populism is the post-war successor of fascism, though renouncing violence and accepting formal democracy. Populism does not only ‘play the game’ of democracy, but depends upon it for the assertion of its legitimacy. Fascism as a regime ended with defeat in the Second World War, though it has reappeared through extreme-right groups and parties in the past few decades. Most contemporary politicians in this vein have distanced themselves from the term ‘fascism,’ but not from its theory or practice. Fascism, Finchelstein writes, is “not only a blurry ghost from the past but also a once-defeated historical ideology that has clear populist and neofascist repercussions today.”³⁰ In other words:

Populism is the key term for understanding the fascist soundings of events and political strategies that reformulated the legacies of fascism for new democratic times. In the guise of postfascist forms of antiliberal democracy, fascism continued its legacy through various combinations of populism and neofascism.³¹

This analysis is not the proposition of someone coming from a radical left perspective, which would rather wholly equate populism with fascism as expressions of the same phenomenon.³² It instead shows lines of transmission

30 Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 14.

31 Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism*, 7–8.

32 John Bellamy Foster, for example, would suggest that Trumpism is an expression of neofascism. According to him, following neo-Marxist theory, “neofascism is the inevitable product of the crisis of monopoly-finance capital.” John Bellamy Foster, “This is not populism,” *Monthly Review: An Independent*

or “transcontextual connections.”³³ The crucial difference between fascism and populism is the latter’s renunciation of the use of violence as a legitimate political tool. Violence in fascism was, by contrast, conceived as sacred: “National myths inspired and legitimised violence as a key dimension of the fascist political religion [...]. Central to this conception was the messianic leader as a warrior who would lead the people into holy contests against internal and external enemies.”³⁴ The central idea of this argument, which we want to stress here, is the notion of continuity between extreme right pre-populist movements and fascism. Equally, we stress the use of fascist ideas of the community, the people, the leader, and the nation as foundational elements of modern populism. After the Second World War, however, “populism often reformulated or even at times rejected these features, especially those related to fascism’s extreme political violence and its totalitarian overthrow of democracy,” not restricting itself to the political right.³⁵ In regard to Latin America, the latter point is an important element, as populism has often presented itself in the region as a progressive or leftist political option, opposing ‘neoliberal,’ ‘oligarchic’ or ‘conservative’ forces. I stress here the great difficulty that many populisms, particularly those based in a leftist perspective, have in accepting formal representative democracy. They instead have a tendency to cling to their own rule, ignoring the basic rules of transparency, accountability, and transmission of power.

The second crucial element inherited from fascism by populism, particularly in Latin America, is the ‘cult of the leader,’ something that has fundamental consequences for the democratic system, and the deterioration of its structures of checks and balances. As Finchelstein states, “the single truth of populism is that the leader and the nation make up a whole.”³⁶ Finchelstein considers common features of populism to include “an extreme form of political religion,” “an apocalyptic vision of politics,” “a political theology founded by a messianic and charismatic leader of the

Socialist Magazine 69, no. 2 (2017).

33 Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism*, 125.

34 Finchelstein, 17.

35 Finchelstein, 17–18.

36 Finchelstein, 5.

people,” and “a mythical idea of history, and the ritual nature of political spectacle,” all features linking populism to fascism.³⁷

Identifying the links, inheritances or historical similarities between fascism and populism is important for the purposes of our research. But, still, we need a comprehensive understanding of the latter political phenomenon to enable accurate comparisons. Fortunately, we are not the first to undertake a comparative analysis of populisms in Europe and Latin America. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, two of the most important scholars on populism, have published several important works on the subject in recent years. Both authors are mostly concerned with “the effects of populist actors in liberal democracies” and “under which circumstances [...] populists constitute a corrective or a threat to the liberal democratic system.”³⁸ Whilst this is not, of course, our main focus, it is certainly a related topic. Most important, however, have been their efforts to arrive at a minimal definition of populism, as a basis from which to proceed with empirical research. This minimal definition arises from a discussion of populism as a movement, as a political style, and as a discourse, in the contexts of Latin America and Europe. In the process, they reject several previously established ideas. For example, they show that: 1) “scholars have convincingly demonstrated that populism in Latin America is compatible with both neoliberalism, and state-centred development,” such that populism is not tied to a specific economic regime; 2) “populism and clientelism are not synonymous,” although in many cases we see them together, particularly in Latin America; 3) “the formation of multi-class alliances is not a defining attribute of populism, but rather a central element of mass politics”; 4) there is a “propensity to conflate demagoguery or opportunism with populism”; 5) Laclau’s theory is extremely abstract and “proposes a concept of populism that becomes so vague and malleable it loses its analytic utility”; 6) “at least implicitly almost all concepts of populism share the idea that the latter always alludes to a confrontation between ‘the people’ and ‘the establishment.’”³⁹

They finally arrive at the following minimal definition: Populism is “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into

37 Finchelstein, 103, 125.

38 Mudde, and Rovira Kaltwasser, eds. *Populism in Europe and the Americas*, 2.

39 Mudde, and Rovira Kaltwasser, eds. *Populism in Europe and the Americas*, 2.

two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ v ‘the corrupt elite’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.” Most relevantly to our research, they add: “This means that populism is, in essence, a form of *moral* politics, as the distinction between ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’ is first and foremost moral (i.e. pure against corrupt), not situational (e.g. position of power), socio-cultural (e.g. ethnicity, religion) or socioeconomic (e.g. class).”⁴⁰ Moral politics, however, is related to grander ideas of right and wrong or good and evil, which are religion-related concepts. This opens the gateway to advancing the idea that populism has also a concealed (or, at least, non-overt) kinship with the religious or the sacred, though these furtive religious elements tend to rapidly develop an ambiguous relationship with the regime’s allegedly secular goals.

According to Mudde and Rovira, the notion of populism competes in the social arena with the idea of elitism, but it inverts elitism’s values (elitists believe that the people are dangerous, dishonest and vulgar, while the elite are superior, morally, culturally and intellectually). Pluralism, on the other hand, opposes both perspectives of reality, and affirms that society is composed of superposed groups with different ideas and interests, a diversity which constitutes its strength. Therefore, pluralists believe that a society should have many centres of power, and that politics ought to reflect their interests through consensus and compromises.⁴¹

The notion of ‘the people’ is central to all of the various forms and realisations of populism. It is most frequently used to express any of three meanings: the people as sovereign, as commoners (or common people), and as the nation.⁴² Arguably, populist parties or regimes in Europe tend to promote the idea of the people as the nation, while the idea of common people as the base of political support is emphasised more often in Latin America. However, it is the idea of popular sovereignty which connects more closely with the general conception of democracy and, as we have seen, with our own definition of laicity (or political secularity). Laicity is thus associated with various forms of legitimacy of power. The greater the degree

40 Mudde, and Rovira Kaltwasser, eds. *Populism in Europe and the Americas*, 8.

41 Mudde, and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, 7.

42 Mudde, and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, 9.

of a transition away from the sacred and towards a predominant grounding in the popular will that this involves, the stronger the form of laicity.

The central question is thus: What are the new conditions that populism introduces in democratic regimes, and how do they affect the relationship with religions in particular? Also, how does this reconsideration or reintroduction of religious elements transform the idea of secular governments based on popular will and not on sacred or religious sources? In other words, what relationship does populism have with religion and secularity?

Let's begin with the relationship between populism and democracy. There are, broadly speaking, three conceptions of this relationship. The first considers populism as a corruptor of democracy. The second considers populism as the true direct democracy, without intermediaries. The third considers populism as a corrective adjustment to democracy, although failing to reinforce it in the long run. Some propose populism as a synthetic combination of all these ideas, depending on context and circumstances.⁴³ As an example, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser suggest that populism tends to play a positive role in the promotion of a minimal or electoral democracy, but a negative one when it concerns the advancement of a completely deployed liberal democratic regime. As a consequence, while populism tends to favour the democratisation of authoritarian regimes, it also ends up diminishing the quality of liberal democracies.⁴⁴ Others would say that we are simply facing two distinct forms of democracy: liberal-representative and populist-participative, in the midst of a "crisis of political intermediation."⁴⁵

4 Populism and Religion

How does populism affect the relationship between religion and politics, and consequently the secularity of the state? There are at least three strands to the answer to this question.

Populism has a binary political logic and discourse, in which society is divided into two unequal parts: the people, who are morally good, and the elites, who are abusive and corrupt. As a consequence, there is a tendency to deny rights to the elites, on the moral basis that they are judged to be

43 Manuel Anselmi, *Populism: An Introduction*, 121.

44 Mudde, and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, 95–96.

45 Anselmi, *Populism: An Introduction*, 3.

parasitic and rapacious.⁴⁶ In the effort to recover rights for the majorities, such rulings can easily devolve into the denial of rights to all others considered to be outside of 'the people.' There is also a temptation (to use religious terminology) among populist leaders to submit questions of human rights to popular referenda, though these are considered by some to be inalienable, for example women's rights or LGBTQI rights. Experience has shown that those rights are better guaranteed where secular institutions have been created to protect minority rights, whilst also considering third party rights and public order. In populist regimes, those rights depend on the changing will of the majority or, worse, that of the leaders. There is not, in any case, a stable constitutional framework protecting those rights according to an established political philosophy.

Another characteristic of populist regimes is that, as society is divided into good and bad, pure and corrupt, the people and the elite, the government considers any criticism or opposition as a threat to its stability. This results in increased pressure on the press in particular, and freedom of expression in general. It also results in the elimination of counterweights to the executive power, either from the parliament, the judiciary or other forces such as entrepreneurs, churches, unions, or even non-governmental organisations.

A third element is the so-called 'moralisation of public life,' which distorts the role of the state, endangering individual freedoms. The establishment of moral guidelines for the citizens, based on religious doctrines or loose ideas of sacred principles (the nation, the flag, the people, traditional values), tends to lead to the denial of the moral autonomy of the individual, essential in any pluralistic society. Because of their Manichean perspectives, populist governments tend to establish moralising rulings, and are inclined to dictate collective and individual behaviours, trying to pronounce what is good and bad in social terms, beyond formal law. On occasion, public moral judgments (in general, through the media) substitute legal judgments. Individuals or organisations are classified according to their political positions, their obedience to the guidelines of the new doctrine, and their adoption of behaviour in conformance with the will of the people, as expressed by the party organs or government

46 Jan-Werner Müller puts this point very clearly: "the populist immediately claims that the issue at stake is entirely moral." Müller, "Populism and the Claim to a Moral Monopoly," 72.

guidelines. The establishment of a public moral order frequently comes into conflict with intellectual and scientific groups, whose opinions are openly demonised (to again use religious terminology). Even religious institutions and their leaders, insofar as they express opinions independent from the government, are accused of forming part of the previous regime, which refuses to disappear. It is common to witness the formation of a new kind of priesthood, normally lay or secular but nonetheless moralising, whose members see themselves as substituting the traditional religious order. This new 'priesthood' is normally led by the head of the executive branch, or by one of their most prominent followers, who dictates the terms of the new public moral order.

As we can observe, the main point of collision between populism and the established form of secularity comes from the former's typical form of leadership. Most populist regimes are headed by an undisputed leader, who ends up concentrating power and making decisions about all sorts of things, placing themselves above democratic institutions and the legal framework. As a result, the religiosity or the secularity of the state is decided according to the particular and changing opinion of the leadership. In other words, when the popular sovereignty is concentrated in a person or a small group of individuals, the character and shape of secularity of the regime depends solely on them, in a sort of regression to the times of monarchical absolutism. Therefore, if the leadership decides to introduce religious aspects into their way of governing, the system built to transfer sources of power from religion to the popular will, and the associated legal and political framework, simply crumble. This has occurred in many populist regimes, to varying degrees.

5 Classical Populism in Action

The historical reference of populism in Latin America is Peronism, following the government of Colonel Juan Domingo Perón, whose rule in Argentina began with his involvement in a military coup in 1943, followed by terms as a president legitimised by electoral means, from 1946 to 1955, until he was ousted by another military coup. Federico Finchelstein maintains that there is a closeness between fascism and populism, which "belong to a converging

political and intellectual history”⁴⁷ and argues that Perón, in a search for legitimacy, “created the first form of modern populism.” Describing the great historical fluctuations of Peronism, he shows how “populism, as it constantly searches for absolute majorities, demands total allegiance to authoritarian forms of leadership, and last but not least, challenges not only liberalism but also popular forms of radical democracy.”⁴⁸

Peronism’s relationship with religion was very similar to that of fascism with religion, both institutional and the vaguer understandings thereof, with the common denominator being ambiguity. Prior to the advent of fascism in Italy, the so-called ‘Roman question,’ a dispute over the temporal power of the papacy within the new Kingdom of Italy, had poisoned the relationship between Italy and the Vatican (where the Pope had been secluded) since 1870. The Pope had thus prohibited Catholics from participating in politics (with the exception of local politics later on), but as time passed, both parties sought a solution. Liberal governments never accepted any terms of agreement that would reverse the situation, but the First World War transformed the political landscape. The Catholic hierarchy hesitantly accepted the constitution of a Catholic Party (significantly named ‘Partito Popolare,’ showing the popular aspirations of the Church), run by a priest (Luigi Sturzo); but once fascists took power, the Pope preferred to negotiate with Mussolini, whom he would name ‘l’uomo della Provvidenza’ (‘the man of Providence’). It didn’t matter that *il Duce* was an anticlerical atheist, as long as he gave the Church what it wanted. The Lateran Treaty of 1929 gave the Catholic church not only territorial and political sovereignty, but enormous economic resources and the confirmation of many measures that favoured the religious institution, such as the reintroduction of military chaplains even in peacetime, the introduction of the crucifix in schools and tribunals, money for the reconstruction of churches, and, above all, the introduction of Catholic teaching in primary schools. The only real conflict with fascism occurred when Mussolini pushed for the assimilation of the Catholic associations into the corporate state. After a period of great tension, both parties backed down, although the situation would ultimately benefit the Catholic church.

47 Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism*, 108.

48 Finchelstein, 110–11.

Peron, who had been a military attaché at the Argentinian Embassy in Rome in 1939-1941, understood the sacralising tendencies of the fascist regime, and reproduced them in many ways. He and his wife Eva ('Evita' to the couple's followers) became objects of adoration. As Finchelstein affirms:

[...] the constant interaction between democratic realities and authoritarian tendencies led postwar populism to present a dual source of legitimation: the leader is the leader because of electoral representation but populist political theology also requires a firm belief in the leader as a transcendental, charismatic figure whose legitimacy goes beyond electoral representation.⁴⁹

Finchelstein goes on to emphasise that "the religious dimensions of the Peronist populist doctrine were intimately linked with the alleged religious nature of Perón's leadership [...]. The constant blurring of the profane and the sacred was continuously pushed to its limits."⁵⁰ An example of this was the formal designation of Evita Perón as 'Spiritual Leader of the Nation,' upon her death in 1952. From then on, all of the country's radio stations were obligated to say that Evita "passed to immortality," in a daily commemoration marking the hour of her passing.⁵¹ Before this, Evita had "told her close advisor, the hardcore cleric-fascist Father Virgilio Filippo, and others in 1951, that Perón was the God of the Argentines."⁵² In any case, Evita became a 'popular saint,' without official recognition from the church, but nonetheless well incorporated into the collective imaginary of the masses.⁵³ Many scholars have identified sacred-religious elements of Peronism, not only through its status as "a political religion" with an "autonomous reinterpretation of the Christian doctrine," but also in its religious structure, its prophetic standing, its Messianism or call for a new

49 Finchelstein, 230.

50 Finchelstein, 231.

51 Pablo Sirvén, *Perón y los medios de comunicación: La conflictiva relación de los gobiernos justicialistas con la prensa 1943-2011* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 2011).

52 Finchelstein, 231.

53 The complex relations in the construction of popular saints in Latin America is approached in Kristín Guadrún Jónsdóttir, "Bandoleros santificados en México," in *Diccionario de Religiones en América Latina*, coord. Roberto Blancarte, Sección de Obras de Antropología (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica - El Colegio de México, 2018), 27-34. See also, in the same volume, José Manuel Valenzuela Arce, "Mística y santos populares transfronterizos," 389-95.

order, the rituals of the socio-political movement, the virtual canonisation of Evita, and its moral competition with the established churches.⁵⁴

Competition for the soul of the Argentines eventually became the main reason for Perón's conflict with the Catholic church, and his resultant downfall. The paradox is that Perón's government had reinstated the ideal of a Catholic nation, through a variety of concrete measures. These included the restoration of religious instruction in schools, and the conferring of considerable economic support and institutional privileges on the church. Above all, Perón re-established a national Catholic identity and culture, which combined the sword and the cross, fighting side by side against foreign enemies represented either by red bolshevism or protestant liberalism.⁵⁵ But Peronism, just like fascism in Europe, increasingly competed with Catholic organisations to establish its primacy in the new corporate state. Inevitably, mounting tension with the Catholic church erupted into conflict, ultimately provoking the fall of Perón. Some scholars have argued that this increasing dispute with the Catholic hierarchy was one of the main causes (if not the primary one) for the end of Perón's government. Despite this, Peronism remained an essential element of Argentinian political culture for the rest of the century and beyond, both as a social political force, and through the ideal of the Catholic national identity, sustained by conservative forces (whether Peronist or otherwise).

Brazil's path to populism, sparked as a reaction to the crisis of 1929, was similar to Argentina's in many ways, with a series of military coups backed by civilian groups propelling Getulio Vargas into power. The eventual dismantling of the liberal state also came along with a new conception of national Catholicism overseen by the army, in alliance with the Catholic hierarchy. This understanding would later be called a 'moral concordat.' Getulio Vargas, who was president from 1930 to 1945 and from 1951 to 1954, became the central figure of a 'New State' (*Estado Novo*, 1937), ruling (almost unchallenged) by non-democratic means. He abolished

54 See Roberto Bosca, *La Iglesia nacional peronista: Factor religioso y poder político* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1997), 397. Also, Susana Bianchi, *Catolicismo y peronismo: Religión y política en Argentina 1943–1955* (Buenos Aires: Trama Editorial/Prometeo libros, 2001).

55 See Loris Zanatta, *Perón y el mito de la nación católica: Iglesia y Ejército en los orígenes del peronismo 1943–1946* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1999), 452.

the National Congress, took control of the legislature and the judiciary, and eliminated the free press. It was only for his final term, from 1951 to 1954, that he was formally elected, at the end of which he committed suicide before he could be ousted from government. A sympathetic witness to his rule gave an accurate portrayal of his political tendencies in 1944, at the height of his power:

Vargas declared himself president, set aside the constitution of 1934, replaced it by a document that was only gradually put into effect, and organized a semi-fascist state, which he called the “New State.” The individual was to live as a part of a society which only the state could represent and embody. The state was entrusted with definite functions in social life, and sought to guide the people for the common good. By dispensing with the intermediary of political parties, it tried to interpret directly the feelings, anxieties, and reactions of the masses [...]. He thinks he is democratic. The people call him democratic. For the population is not regimented and he intends to give Brazilians democratic institutions as soon as they are ready for them.⁵⁶

As in the case of Perón, Vargas would eventually lose his power through a military coup, but would leave a political heritage that endured many decades beyond. Populism (the “semi-fascist” phenomenon in the above quotation) would become a permanent characteristic of Brazilian politics. The Catholic church was its privileged partner for many decades. This partnership ended following the repression of Catholics in the early 1970s, and the church’s deepening engagement with issues of social justice and human rights.⁵⁷

6 Contemporary Populism

Upon coming to power, the attitude of most populist governments in Latin America (and fascist governments in Europe) towards the Catholic church tends to initially be obsequious, due to the prestige and high credibility of the religious institution in the region. Once members of the Catholic hierarchy pronounce any sort of criticism of the government, however, the

56 Lillian E. Fisher, “Getulio Vargas, the Strong Man of Brazil,” *Social Science* 19, no. 2 (1944): 84, and 86.

57 See Kenneth P. Serbin, *Secret Dialogues: Church-State Relations, Torture, and Social Justice in Authoritarian Brazil* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

state's reactions are harsh and inclined towards forms of anticlericalism.⁵⁸ In that sense, although rightist populists in particular tend to build initial informal alliances with institutional religions, in the long run both they and leftist populists end up colliding with them. When a populist leader faces opposition from a church, there are two common reactions: 1) A direct attack on the clergy, with accusations of all possible evils in society, from laziness to paedophilia. As in other cases, members of the clergy are lumped together with other supporters of the elite, accused of being overly accustomed to privileges. 2) Identification with a so-called 'real Christianity,' where the populist leader embraces a closeness to a version of Christ who fought for the poor and socially deprived.⁵⁹

Populism was a major characteristic of many Latin American countries following the economic collapse of 1929 and the fall of oligarchic agro-exporter liberal elites. The most important cases, though, were those of the two biggest countries in South America. In most cases, populist governments in South America came to power by the hands of, or accompanied by, the military. Symptomatically, these political experiments were also interrupted by military coups, such as in Argentina in 1945, and in Brazil in 1964. The Cold War and the fear of communist or socially radical revolts, heightened by the Cuban Revolution of 1959, solidified the alliance between the military apparatus and the Catholic church. Even some reformist programmes in Bolivia in the 1950s and in Peru in the 1970s were undertaken by military governments, with the implicit or open support of the Catholic hierarchy. Direct military presence in politics lasted until the 1970s, with the Chilean and the Argentinian cases being the most notable for the 'dirty wars' that ensued, involving extensive repression, with tens of thousands of victims. The 1980s witnessed, for the first time, a real democratisation of the political systems in Latin America. It was with this new establishment of truly democratic institutions that a second wave of populism arrived. First, in the form of neoliberal experiments (Menem in

58 This was very clear in the case of Peronism, see Susana Bianchi, *Catolicismo y peronismo*.

59 In Venezuela, this was presented as "Bolivarian Christo-Marxism," see Guillermo T. Avelledo Coll, "Venezuela: Chavismo e Iglesia católica," in *Diccionario de religiones en América Latina*, coord. Roberto Blancarte (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2018), 650.

Argentina, Collor de Mello in Brazil), and later through leftist governments at the end of the millennium.

A second expression of populism can be seen in the government of Hugo Chávez, a lieutenant colonel of the Venezuelan army, who, despite having headed a failed coup against the civilian government in 1992, was elected president six years later. By reforming the constitution, he enabled his repeated re-election, maintaining power until his death in 2013. Chávez has become the epitome of new Latin American populism. Although theoretically more respectful of democracy, using it to acquire legitimate power, this new kind of populism manipulates institutions in order to remain in power. It does this primarily by the removing or weakening of the legislative and judicial branches, and other possible counterweights, particularly the mass media, and any other possible opposition. As a result, and because populist governments need to construct a holistic social project to present as an alternative to the previous socio-political situation (frequently liberalism or neo-liberalism), their relationship with institutional religion is frequently either ambiguous or openly negative.

In the case of Venezuela, a country with a political secularist tradition, a majoritarian Catholic population (around 70%) and a growing evangelical presence (around 20%), the relationship between populism and religion reproduces the main characteristics that we have already discussed.⁶⁰ The central concept defining this relationship is ambiguity. First of all, some dealings of the populist government with the hegemonic religious institution are tense. The Chávez government experienced rising tensions with the Catholic bishops almost from the beginning, after accusing the Catholic hierarchy of being on the side of the elites (which probably was true). Nonetheless, in his moment of crisis, when he was temporarily ousted from power and his life was in danger, it was the archbishop of Caracas that he called to beg for help, which he obtained. Once back in power, facing questions from the bishops concerning the possibility of a shared social project instead of a revolution, he answered them: "I know that you don't like the word 'revolution.' Call it whatever you want, but it is unstoppable. And ask God to be peaceful. It doesn't depend on me. If you don't let me, it's going ahead anyway."⁶¹ Later, the bishops criticised

60 A brief description of historical and contemporary Venezuelan Church-state relations can be found in Avelledo Coll, "Venezuela: Chavismo e Iglesia católica."

61 Juan G. Bedoya, "El calvario de los obispos en la Venezuela chavista," *El País* 2

the concentration of power, the increasing authoritarianism, and the Marxist orientation of the government. Chávez responded that such declarations were “shameful” and “morally unacceptable.”⁶² In another moment of tension, Chávez also displayed the second common populist reaction to criticism from religion, telling Catholic bishops: “we are the real Christians. You are not. You are the devil himself.” Then he said that Venezuela had a secular state (*estado seglar*) and threatened a revision of the treaties with the Vatican.⁶³ When Cardinal Jorge Urosa, Archbishop of Caracas, said in 2010 that the country was “heading towards being a socialist state of the Marxist-communist type,” Chávez reacted furiously calling the cardinal a “troglydyte” and bishops “bums” who should work for once. But, facing elections in 2012, Chávez reaffirmed his desire to have a good relationship with the bishops, offering to work together for the good of the country: “The church can contribute a lot, together with the government, in the fight against poverty, misery and delinquency [...] as long as each one plays its corresponding role in society based on mutual respect.”⁶⁴

A third variant of populism in Latin America, ethnopopulism, has been observed in Bolivia and Mexico. In ethnopopulism, the populist leader appeals to ancient (precolonial) religious traditions (which, in the case of Latin America, is always mixed with Catholicism). This clears the way for a nativist perspective, in which institutional religion is criticised, and a new source of the sacred is introduced into the public arena. Because most of the ‘ancient’ rituals are reinvented, there is a tendency to include a variety of esoteric and New Age beliefs. Paradoxically, these beliefs are a sign of a certain secularisation of society, inasmuch as they represent a particular bricolage of beliefs that individuals construct to create a new worldview narrative.

(2019), https://elpais.com/elpais/2019/02/01/ideas/1549033010_821919.html

62 César Paredes, “¿Por qué es tan complicada la relación Iglesia - Chávez en Venezuela?” *Semana*, October 23, 2007, <https://www.semana.com/on-line/articulo/por-que-tan-complicada-relacion-iglesia-chavez-venezuela/89041-3/>

63 In Spanish the word ‘seglar’ (as opposed to ‘secular,’ which also exists) refers to lay people within the church, or someone that has not received religious orders. In this case, however, the meaning can be extended to an idea of secular. Venezuela, like many countries in Latin America, has concordats with the Holy See, in which some privileges are accorded.

64 Associated Press, “Chávez dispuesto a mejorar relación con Iglesia católica,” *Actualidad Radio*, July 11, 2012, <http://actualidadradio.com/noticias/chavez-dispuesto-a-mejorar-relacion-con-iglesia-catolica/>

7 Popular Religion and the Cult of the Leader

Some scholars have identified a close relationship between popular religiosity and some populist regimes.⁶⁵ There is much still to be researched on this complex subject, and this is not the place to develop arguments on the topic, but it is clear that there is a connection that explains at least part of the people's politico-religious involvement, particularly that of the disadvantaged masses. At the very least, we can state that this was the Latin American experience. The *descamisados*, the impoverished followers of Perón, for example, transformed the political revolution into a socio-religious fight, with the help of the movement and the compliance of the government.

As in the case of Peronism, populism in Venezuela did not die with the death of Chávez in March 2013. His successor, Nicolás Maduro, promoted the veneration of Chávez as a saint of the people, in accordance with a tradition of popular saints rooted in Latin American culture (as in the example of Eva Perón). During Maduro's first term as president, a scandal erupted when a modified Lord's Prayer, substituting 'our Father' for 'our Chávez,' was recited at a meeting of the official United Socialist Party of Venezuela (Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela).⁶⁶ Maduro's own religious background is mixed: he was raised Catholic, with paternal Jewish origins, and is also a follower of an Indian guru.⁶⁷ This bricolage is a sign of contemporary religious populism in secular times.

There is not enough space in this text to describe the multiple examples of Latin American populism, going from leftist to moderates to right-wing, from very religious to theoretically secularist. To name but a few examples, we could include Lula da Silva or Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Evo Morales in Bolivia, or Vicente Fox and Andrés Manuel

65 See, for example, the case of Peronism and popular religiosity as outlined in: Bosca, *La Iglesia nacional peronista*, and Bianchi, *Catolicismo y peronismo*.

66 Matt Roper, "Let us pray... to Hugo Chavez! Venezuela's Socialist party creates own version of the Lord's Prayer invoking the deceased leader," *Daily Mail*, September 3, 2014, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2742698/Venezuela-s-Socialist-party-creates-version-Lord-s-Prayer-invoking-deceased-leader.html>

67 Maduro "also has a mystical side. He has been a follower of the late Indian guru Sathya Sai Baba. Mr. Maduro and Ms. Flores visited the guru in India in 2005." William Neuman, "Waiting to See if a 'Yes Man' Picked to Succeed Chávez Might Say Something Else," *The New York Times*, December 22, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/23/world/americas/nicolas-maduro-chavez-s-chosen-successor-draws-mixed-opinions.html>

López Obrador in Mexico. The common denominator between them, however, is a personalist conception of power, the use of religious symbols to legitimise their authority, a tense and ambiguous relationship with institutional religion, and a diffused personal religious bricolage. Most importantly, there is an idea of a 'moral mission.' Populist leaders see themselves as moral leaders, beyond particular religions or spiritual traditions. They become, in a way, high priests of their country. They see themselves as combatants against the corruption and immorality of the elites or the establishment, whilst simultaneously sacralising 'the people,' who they impersonate. In this way, they open the way for their own sacralisation through the cult of the leader. This connection of leaders with popular religiosity (whilst these leaders' personal beliefs can range from atheistic to agnostic to deeply religious) is essential to understanding their connection with the masses, at least in Latin America.

The specific connection populist leaders have with popular religiosity depends on the religious culture of the country or the region where it develops. Evo Morales, for example, promoted the separation of church and state in the new (2009) Bolivian constitution. He did this not because he wanted to separate religion and politics, but rather because he felt that popular religion in Bolivia (which is a highly syncretic religion) should have more independence and freedom from the doctrinal yoke of the Catholic church. The Vatican has, after all, battled the 'superstitious' practices rooted in popular religiosity for centuries. Morales could then reconnect with public rituals of traditional indigenous beliefs in public ceremonies. This shows, in any case, why separation of church and state is not necessarily an indicator of secularity, particularly in contexts like the indigenous one in Latin America, where worldviews or 'cosmogonic visions' are inclined to be holistic. The idea of separation is sometimes confounded with a long history of disenfranchisement from the religious and political tutelage of the Catholic church.

Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, on the other hand, has associated himself with the most conservative sectors of society: the military, the Catholic right, and conservative evangelicalism, which is highly intolerant of indigenous and African-American beliefs and practices. These conservative groups propose a fundamentalist version of the scriptures, defining traditional gender roles and refusing to grant equal rights to LGBTQI persons. This type of evangelicalism has been accused by some scholars of being

a barely disguised form of Catholic popular religiosity.⁶⁸ This judgement seems a little hasty, as, in fact, the latter tends to be more understanding of ‘deviations’ from the norm. In any case, this accusation indicates how undifferentiated popular religious practices can be, and how unimportant doctrine can be in daily religious life.

Bolsonaro has been part of the increasing ‘buffoonism’ in politics, and is the epitome of the most vulgar and conservative positions in Latin America. A former captain in the Brazilian army, and then a congressman for many years, he was known for his crude and obnoxious statements to the media. In a television debate, he told a congresswoman that he would never rape her, because she was not worthy of it. He also said he opposed equal pay for men and women, and attributed homosexuality to drugs or women working. He contributed to fake news, claiming the existence of a ‘gay kit’ including a baby bottle with a nipple in the form of a penis.⁶⁹ Much has been said about the influence of evangelicals on Bolsonaro’s triumph. Indeed, the president of the largest South American country courted their support in many ways: he announced his presidential candidacy as a member of the Social Christian Party,⁷⁰ was baptised in an evangelical ceremony in the River Jordan in Israel, and used the campaign slogan “Brazil above all and God above everyone.” He said in his first appearance after winning the election that he would be guided by three books: The Bible, the Brazilian Constitution, and an abridged version of Churchill’s Second World War

68 Jean-Pierre Bastian, “La recomposition religieuse de l’Amérique latine dans la modernité tardive,” in *La modernité religieuse en perspective compare: Europe-amérique latine*, ed. Jean-Pierre Bastian (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2001).

69 Sandra Fisher, and Aline Vaz, “Populismo no Brasil de contrapostos: Manipulação do autêntico e profanação do contrário,” *Agenda Política: Revista de Descendentes de Ciência Política da Universidade Federal de São Carlos* 8, no. 1 (2020): 131–56, 143, 148.

70 In fact, in his 18 years as a legislator, he has moved through various parties on liberal-conservative or national conservative lines. See Lucia Caruncho, “Partidos de derecha y estilos de liderazgo: Notas sobre el PRO argentino y el PSL brasileño,” *Colombia Internacional* 103 (2020). Trindade argues that Bolsonaro’s right-wing political coalition involves the following components: a) national authoritarianism, the successor of the Brazilian positivist tradition, b) the Catholic right wing, and c) the integralist right wing, which, it has been argued, may be the politico-ideological movement closest to European fascism. Hêlgio Trindade, *Integralismo: O fascismo brasileiro na década de trinta* (São Paulo: Difusão Europeia do Livro, 1974), quoted in Fabio Gentile, “Populism and Brazilian Social Sciences: Theoretical and Methodological Challenges,” *Conhecer: Debate entre o Público e o Privado* 10, no. 24 (2020): 53.

memoirs. Nonetheless, the exact influence of evangelicals in Bolsonaro's government, particularly from Pentecostal and Neo-Pentecostal churches, has yet to be fully measured. Other scholars have placed more emphasis on cultural transformations (including that of Pentecostals) and their impact on the political system. In any case, Brazil is still the country with greatest number of Catholics in the world, at around 130 million, 60% of the population, while protestants and evangelicals make up only a quarter. So, Bolsonaro has to deal with conservative religious support that is a mix of Catholic and Pentecostal. His agenda is clearly based around a particular Christian conservative perspective of the world as he seeks a crusade against 'social evils' as dictated by his particular moral judgment. He looks to fight what is referred to as 'cultural Marxism,' meaning a battle against four morally determined enemies: corruption, delinquency, communism and the so-called 'gender ideology.' He views cultural Marxism as an evil to be fought, with these four elements as its expression.

The idea of the 'good people' having been corrupted by modern and liberal values is not new. An interesting facet of recent developments, however, is supposedly leftist or progressive movements or governments evoking a nostalgic idea of the past (before neoliberalism). They look back to a posited time in which the 'good people' lived in peace and harmony, following their traditions (among them, their religions), around the nucleus of the family, in an undisrupted social fabric.⁷¹ But, as has been witnessed around the world since the arrival of modernity, rural areas tend to be more conservative than urban ones. A call for a mythical or a bucolic past therefore becomes a plea for a more traditionalist and conservative society, in most cases anti-liberal. Just as in the case of proto-populisms like Russian Bolshevism, a glorification of 'the people' turns into a demonisation of the elites and their knowledge, as well as science and other aspects of modernity. In contemporary times, this has led to a denial of minority rights, particularly women's or LGBTQI rights. In the case of Brazil, this has occurred alongside a suppression of marginal religions, such as African-American or indigenous ones.

71 It is interesting how this element has been explored in other cases of political movements and particularly in populist discourse. See Robert Gould, "Vox España and Alternative für Deutschland: Propagating the Crisis of National Identity," *Genealogy* 3, no. 4 (2019): 10.

Mexico, the second most populous country in Latin America, has also recently seen the rise of populism. The phenomenon had previously appeared sporadically (in 1934-1940 and 1970-1976) but had been kept at bay via the increasing institutionalisation of the 1910 revolution, through the hegemony of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The PRI is a basically anticlerical and secularist conglomerate of revolutionary factions, which established limits to the military and the Catholic church throughout most of the 20th century. The end of the hegemony of the authoritarian state, and the installation of a real democracy saw the return of the influence of religion.

In 2000, the PRI's long hegemony was broken by a right-wing populist, Vicente Fox, who introduced religious symbols (which are prohibited) into his campaign, and, from the first day of his presidency, tried to dissolve the strict separation of religion and politics. However, not only did the structure of the secular state in Mexico remain unchanged, but a reaction among liberal groups ended up cementing a formal secularity of the republic in the constitution. In 2018, a new type of populism, this time supposedly leftist, came to power. As with most populisms, this political organisation, structured through a party called *Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional* (MORENA), formed several alliances with other parties, including *Partido Encuentro Social* (PES), led by conservative evangelicals. Both names play on religious symbols, as 'morena' (Spanish for 'brown') is how Mexicans refer to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the most venerated religious symbol in Mexico, and 'PES' sounds like 'pez,' Spanish for 'fish,' one of the symbols of Christianity. Beyond the use of religious symbols, the new president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (better known as AMLO) exactly fits the populist model. However, his is not exactly a leftist populism, which is one reason why his case is of interest to us.

López Obrador sees himself as someone who is going to save, and spiritually and materially heal, the country. The great enemy is 'neoliberalism' and the elites, whom he calls 'the mafia of power.' According to him, corruption has been imposed on the 'good people,' who are, on the contrary, a source of great moral values. The president opposes not only abortion and gay marriage, but even divorce, which he claims is a product of neoliberalism. Instead, he echoes the traditional discourse of the conservative parties, emphasising the importance of family, fighting delinquency and the breakup of the social fabric, and thus 'saving Mexico.'

López Obrador has a bucolic and utopic image of rural life: “In the rural areas there is still a healthy way of life, full of moral and spiritual values. To return to the countryside means to strengthen a cultural identity of the highest human quality.”⁷² For him, “the truth is Christian and the lie is of the Devil.”⁷³ The Mexican president has become a preacher, telling people that they must behave well and help the poor, so that they can go to church or a temple at peace with themselves, in the knowledge that they are good Christians.⁷⁴ In his speech accepting his candidacy from the evangelical party, he promised “a moral constitution,” which he continues to push, though it has been rejected by most commentators from a variety of academic disciplines and social groups for multiple reasons. There is not enough space here to develop the particular mixture of religion and politics that López Obrador has brought to the public arena. The crucial element that we want to advance here is that he is a leader that has aspirations of ‘converting’ people, ‘cleaning’ the state and society from corruption, ‘purifying’ politics, and ‘saving’ the country. He wants to convince everyone that, when used to engage with social causes, Christianity can transform the consciences of the people, and be a source of cultural and spiritual values. He acts simultaneously as the president of the republic and a kind of high priest to the nation, mixing Catholic, evangelical and other humanistic-esoteric beliefs with indigenous rituals and practices.

Precisely because political leaders become ‘high priests’ of their own cult, and are increasingly venerated by the people, they tend to consider themselves above the law, and increasingly free to choose whether to bypass or accommodate it. There is thus a tendency to become authoritarian and intolerant to any form of opposition, such that the judiciary, the legislature, the media, intellectuals and scientists are commonly targeted as enemies posing a threat to the transformations heralded by these governments. We are dealing here with the search for a new ‘public morality,’ a sense of good and evil or right and wrong, to be imposed on the whole society. Because ‘the people’ are conceived as a single uniform entity, space for plurality is simply reduced.

72 Bernardo Barranco, and Roberto Blancarte, *AMLO y la religión: El Estado laico bajo amenaza* (México: Grijalbo-Random House, 2019), 24.

73 Barranco, and Blancarte, *AMLO y la religión*, 26.

74 Barranco, and Blancarte, 26.

8 Europe and the Legacy of Fascism

It is in the sphere of public morality where we can find the closest resemblance between Latin American and European populism. Outside of this, there are several key differences separating the two political phenomena, which we will examine presently. We will focus mainly on two parties, Vox in Spain and Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, although similar characteristics appear in many other European parties classified as extreme-right, conservative-right or plainly populist parties.⁷⁵

We have here at least four connections of European populism to religion: 1) as a sacralised idea of nation; 2) as an identification with a specific religion (in this case, Christianity as a whole for Germany, and specifically Catholicism for Spain); 3) as islamophobia; and 4) as conservative morality in matters of gender and sexuality, emanating from a religious background.

Vox, a nationalist centralist Spanish party founded in December 2013, declares: “Our project comes down to the defence of Spain, of family and life; by reducing the size of the state, by guaranteeing equality among Spaniards and by the expulsion of government from your private life.”⁷⁶ Some of its leaders have refused to condemn the Francoist dictatorship, taking the line that “we are his heirs” and “history is what it is.”⁷⁷ In its foundational manifesto, Vox explicitly calls all Spaniards “that wish a Spain united in permanent progress, material and moral.”⁷⁸ Although it states that this project “is based in democratic convictions and the values pertaining to open society,” it also maintains the existence of a crisis affecting Spain’s “institutions, its national unity and its collective morality.”⁷⁹ Vox

75 See, for example, Robert Gould, “Vox España and Alternative für Deutschland.” Gould compares the two parties in order to show “how very different parts of the European continent which achieved stable democratic government after a period of extreme-right/fascist rule have now produced and are propagating very similar right-wing views on national identity—a term which includes among other topics culture, the family, the relationship to Europe, and immigration,” 2.

76 Vox España, “Quiénes somos,” 2014, <https://www.voxespana.es/espana/que-es-vox>, accessed January 16, 2020.

77 “Se recupera un vídeo viral que Vox no quiere que veas: ‘No condenamos el franquismo porque somos sus herederos,’” *El plural*, July 2, 2020, https://www.elplural.com/comunicacion/protagonistas/recupera-video-viral-vox-no-veas-no-condenamos-franquismo-herederos_243187102

78 Vox España, “Manifiesto fundacional,” 2014, <https://www.voxespana.es/espana/manifiesto-fundacional-vox>, accessed January 16, 2020.

79 Vox España, “Manifiesto fundacional.”

emphasises “the defence of the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation,” the need for a centralised government, meaning a rejection of the regional autonomies, and consequently the enforced use of the Spanish (Castilian) language throughout the whole country. That is why the party statutes refuse any possibility of an alliance with separatist parties.⁸⁰ As Robert Gould affirms, “Vox presents a quasi-sacralised vision of the Spanish nation.”⁸¹ In sum, this party is an extreme reaction to the separatism of the regions, particularly Catalonia, but also to linguistic and cultural particularities, to migration, and to what some see as the bureaucratic dictates of the European Union. Concerning religion, Gould points out that “the Christian element is restricted to Roman Catholicism” and also: “Importantly, for Vox *hispanidad* strongly correlates with religion and can imply or include an element of islamophobia or *maurophobia* [phobia of the ‘Moors’].”⁸² And he maintains: “In the name of its insistence on the Christian foundations of European culture and values, Vox asserts that ‘political deals’ and ‘ideological prejudices’ have contributed to the current crisis and ‘have built a Europe alienated from its spiritual foundations.’”⁸³

Another element that has marked the discourse of Vox’s leader, Santiago Abascal Conde, and many of its closest followers, is the attack on ‘gender laws,’ meaning the collection of reforms allowing abortion, homosexual marriage, and other norms concerning women’s or LGBTQI rights. One of Vox’s best-known proposals in this regard is the failed initiative of the ‘parental pin’ or ‘parental veto,’ which contends that parents should be asked for prior consent for any teaching concerning sexuality, gender identity, feminism or LGBTQI diversity in public schools.⁸⁴ This idea has already been exported to other countries, particularly to Latin America. The regional government of Murcia, controlled by other right-wing parties but needing one vote from Vox for their budget, has already imposed such a measure, which has been contested by the central educational authorities

80 Vox España, *Estatutos de Vox*, 2015, <https://www.voxespana.es/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/ESTATUTOS-VOX-Aprobados-18-10-15.pdf>, accessed January 16, 2020.

81 Gould, “Vox España and Alternative für Deutschland,” 8.

82 Gould, 9.

83 Gould, 10.

84 María H. Pérez, “Pin Parental,” *La sexta*, October 9, 2020, https://www.lasexta.com/diccionarios/politico/pinparental_202010095f8087fb6a828b000110d502.html

in Madrid.⁸⁵ The truth about whether religious considerations really do form the core of Vox's political programme was, in a way, exposed in their justification of a meeting between their leadership and Steve Bannon, then advisor to Donald Trump: "He thinks that the great battle that has to be fought in the world involves those who are pro-nationalists in the face of illegal immigration and in the defence of their religious roots."⁸⁶

Germany's Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) was also founded in 2013, and is a perfect fit for the populist label. In their programme, for example, they affirm (without evidence) that "behind the scenes a small and powerful elite within the political parties is secretly in charge, and is responsible for the misguided development of past decades."⁸⁷ The AfD also claims, wrongly, that "Germany has the lowest birth rate across Europe."⁸⁸ This claim is demonstrably false: in 2015, the year before the manifesto was written (and thus the latest figures available at the time), Germany's fertility rate was higher than many other European countries including Portugal, Cyprus, Poland, Greece, Spain and Italy. In fact, in 2016, Germany recorded its highest fertility rate since 1973.⁸⁹ The AfD received its biggest political boost with the mass arrival of refugees from Muslim countries, particularly those fleeing from the war in Syria in 2015. As with Vox, the AfD's politics centre around a rejection of migrants and Muslims in particular, with a particular conception of the Christian foundations of European culture, even if the subject itself is not of fundamental importance to them, and is mostly used for strategic purposes.

85 "¿Qué es lo que Vox llama 'pin parental'?", *El País*, January 17, 2020, https://elpais.com/sociedad/2020/01/17/actualidad/1579258136_624639.html and Ana Torres Menárguez, "El gobierno recurrirá en los tribunales el 'pin parental' impuesto en los colegios de Murcia," *El País*, January 16, 2020, https://elpais.com/sociedad/2020/01/16/actualidad/1579186618_845143.html?rel=mas

86 Natalia Junquera, "Qué tienen en común Vox, el jefe de campaña de Trump y Le Pen," *El País*, December 5, 2018, https://elpais.com/politica/2018/12/04/actualidad/1543949909_697562.html

87 Alternative für Deutschland, "Manifesto for Germany: The Political Programme of the Alternative for Germany," 2016, 7. https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2017/04/2017-04-12_afd-grundsatzprogramm-englisch_web.pdf, accessed January 16, 2020.

88 Alternative für Deutschland, "Manifesto for Germany," 36.

89 Eurostat Press Office, "Births and Fertility: Over 5 Million Babies born in the EU in 2015," news release no. 41/2017, March 8, 2017, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7898237/3-08032017-AP-EN.pdf/b17c1516-faad-4e65-b291-187826a7ac88>

Some scholars have identified points of contact between Christian religious positions and right-wing political activism, identifying the personal religious and ideological trajectories of some of the leaders.⁹⁰ Andrea Althoff searches for similarities and differences between conservatism, conservative Christianity, right-wing populism, and right-wing extremism. It is evident that they are intermingled in many ways, and she finds a nexus between “Christian conservatism,” “right-wing populism” and “right-wing extremism.” Religion as a belief, however, was not an important marker for the founders of the AfD. According to Althoff, “in May 2016, Alexander Gauland, co-leader of the AfD parliamentary group, stated to the newspaper *Christians and the World (Christ und Welt)*: ‘We are not a Christian party. We are a German party that tries to safeguard the German interests’ [...]. Nevertheless religion was an element that was never absent. Either it was used as a positive identity marker that was under threat, namely the ‘Christian tradition,’ or as a negative reference to the Muslim-Other, a group which was and is portrayed as embodying this threat.”⁹¹ Althoff finds some connections between the ideology of the AfD and the individual religious trajectories of some right-wing leaders, who were either members of or connected to the party (Bernd Lucke, Götz Kubitschek, Maximilian Krah, Frauke Petry, Markus Pretzel, Michael Frisch, etc.). Equally, the AfD has connections to religious media outlets, particularly through links with religious presence groups such as ‘Christians in the AfD.’⁹² Issues we have identified as relating to ‘public morality’ play an important role in these connections. As Althoff identifies: “Typical positions among conservative Christians are a defence of traditional gender roles.” These positions would include “an emphasis on the importance of the traditional family, an anti-homosexual stance, a rejection of same-sex marriages, (including child adoption by same-sex-couples), and opposition

90 See Andrea Althoff, “Right-Wing Populism and Religion in Germany: Conservative Christians and the Alternative for Germany (AfD),” *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 2 (2018).

91 Althoff, “Right-Wing Populism and Religion,” 344.

92 This could lead us to other possible discussions that we can’t pursue beyond the scope of this research. For example the debate about around secularisation and “religionisation.” See Markus Drefßler “Modes of Religionization: A Constructivist Approach to Secularity,” *Working Paper Series of the HCAS “Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities”* 7, Leipzig, 2019.

to abortion.”⁹³ The overlap of all types of conservatism and right-wing populism “clearly consists of belief in the central tenets of authority (an emphasis on law-and-order policies and the primacy of security) and community (contrasting to individualism).” Althoff concludes that “more generally speaking, the radical-right movement and conservatism share, in a socio-political sense, anti-liberal and anti-modern positions (e.g. the defence of the traditional family and traditional gender roles).”⁹⁴

The AfD’s political programme is clear on many of these aspects. In its preamble, it advocates “direct democracy,” “family values, and German cultural heritage.”⁹⁵ The programme states that “the AfD is committed to the traditional family as a guiding principle” and that “there is a misconceived view of feminism, which favours women with a career above mothers and housewives.” The programme also criticises the approximately one hundred thousand abortions that take place each year in Germany for “so-called ‘social reasons.’”⁹⁶ The AfD advocates “respect for life, where the safeguarding of life starts with the embryo.” Accordingly, “the AfD opposes all attempts to downplay abortions, government support for abortions, or to declare abortions as a human right.”⁹⁷ The programme states that AfD members “maintain an open mind towards other nations and cultures, but wish to be and remain German at heart.” Therefore, the programme proclaims, “we shall continuously strive to uphold human dignity, support families with children, retain our western Christian culture, and maintain our language and traditions.”⁹⁸ Along with these propositions, the AfD declares that “gender ideology, early sexualisation, governmental funding of gender studies, quota systems and the deprivation of the German language with gender-conforming words have to be terminated.”⁹⁹

In specific matters of religion, the programme promotes a particular conception of religious freedom. For example, it affirms that national security “ensures that citizens can live together in peace in an open and

93 Althoff, “Right-Wing Populism and Religion in Germany,” 341.

94 Althoff, 341.

95 Alternative für Deutschland, “Manifesto for Germany,” 5.

96 Alternative für Deutschland, 40.

97 Alternative für Deutschland, 43.

98 Alternative für Deutschland, 43.

99 Alternative für Deutschland, 54.

free society irrespective of origin or religion.”¹⁰⁰ At the same time, however, the AfD strongly associates “religion” with “German as the predominant culture” (*Leitkultur*).¹⁰¹ This culture, the AfD states, is derived from three sources: 1) the religious tradition of Christianity; 2) the scientific and humanist heritage “whose ancient roots were renewed during the period of Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment,” and, 3) Roman law. These traditions shape, among other things, “the relationship between the sexes.” Although the AfD “pledges its unconditional support to the freedom of faith, worship and conscience,” it immediately states that this freedom of worship must take place “within the limits of public laws, human rights and our value system.” It then openly proclaims its anti-Islamic stance: “The AfD firmly opposes Islamic practice which is directed against our liberal-democratic constitutional order, our laws, and the Judeo-Christian and humanist foundations of our culture.”¹⁰²

Althoff explores whether there is a convergence of conservative religious and right-wing populist beliefs, and what the content of such an overlap would be. Following the trajectories of some of the AfD’s leaders, Althoff believes that “not only are political convictions important for the success of the AfD leaders, but also, to a certain extent, middle-class institutional Christian backgrounds and related experiences.”¹⁰³ Yet, for Althoff, the most direct connection between right-wing populism and conservative Christianity in the case of Germany “is the AfD’s reference to the Christian tradition as the main ingredient of the German culture.” For the AfD, Althoff writes, this German culture and Christianity are under threat from Muslim immigrants.¹⁰⁴ The radical variant of this stance is set out by one of the leaders of the extreme right: “If you want to hear this now

100 Alternative für Deutschland, 23.

101 The concept of ‘Leitkultur,’ which can be translated either as ‘dominant’ or ‘predominant’ culture, does not necessarily indicate a legal or political preference. Some would also use the term in the sense of a ‘majoritarian’ culture. Deeper research is needed to understand how it is perceived by AfD militants. A possible guide for this discussion is the insightful article of Niklas Luhmann, “Religion als Kultur,” in *Das Europa der Religionen: Ein Kontinent zwischen Säkularisierung und Fundamentalismus*, ed. Otto Kallscheuer (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1996).

102 Luhmann, “Religion als Kultur,” 47.

103 Althoff, “Right-Wing Populism and Religion in Germany,” 358.

104 Althoff, 358.

from a believer in Christ: The German people is a design of God. It is a special way to go through history in all its heights and lows.”¹⁰⁵

9 Concluding Remarks: Populism, Political Contexts and the Secular

The main difference between Latin American and European political systems is that in the former all political systems are ‘presidential’ while in the latter most political systems are ‘parliamentarian,’ or at least semi-parliamentarian (or semi-presidential) as in France.

Some scholars have already considered the political conditions that generate or enable certain forms of populism. Mudde and Rovira explain that populist actors do not operate in a political vacuum, as political contexts establish the conditions and incentives for different types of populist mobilisations. Furthermore, they assert that “probably the most relevant factor” for which type of populism emerges in a system is whether the system is parliamentary or presidential. They maintain that, in general, presidential systems reinforce personal leaderships, while parliamentary systems incentivise the emergence of political parties. Consequently, in a presidential system, populist leaders, even without a connection to a party, can rise and even win executive power, while in parliamentary systems the person who controls the executive is named by one or more political parties represented in the parliament. It is not a coincidence that “almost all populist forces in Europe are more or less well-organized political parties.”¹⁰⁶ We could thus propose this distinction as a first element of differentiation between Latin America and western Europe: while in the latter populism tends to appear more in the form of parties, in the former, populism is more likely to be personalist in its conception. As a result, a populist leader is much more common in Latin America, tending to concentrate power in their own hands.

Nevertheless, it is important to remark that parliamentary systems are not completely immune to personalist leaderships, which are, on occasion, able to distort or undermine the system in question, using the party as an instrument of control. Fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany are the clearest and best-known historical examples of this. More recent cases, like

105 Götz Kubitschek, as quoted by Althoff, 345, 358.

106 Mudde, and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, 58.

that of Boris Johnson in Great Britain, clearly show how, even in the most traditionally democratic systems, the arrival of populist leaders is always possible. Eastern Europe is also home to several parliamentary systems, for example in Poland and Hungary, wherein the governments have become prone to personalist politics and unchecked authoritarianism. Therefore, we could conclude that, while differences in this regard exist between Latin America and Europe, possibilities of populism with neo-fascist tendencies are nonetheless present everywhere.

Populist regimes (which advocate participative democracy) are more inclined to introduce religious elements in their political performance than representative democratic ones, which tend to be more secularised. This is because the latter are designed to respect established institutions and safeguard plurality. Populist governments tend to favour non-institutional rule, and are therefore prone to personalist and fluctuating policies. To summarise the situation, the religious elements typically introduced by populist regimes are: ambiguous (and consequently tense) relations with religious institutions (using them, establishing alliances with them, integrating them into ideological schemes); the use of religion or religious symbols as instruments of an exclusivist identity; a tendency to establish a sacredness of the state or of the leader themselves (who in some cases becomes a kind of non-denominational 'high priest' of the nation); and an aim of substituting traditional religious teachings with a new public 'moral order,' which is frequently related to a bucolic and nostalgic, and therefore conservative, vision of the past. This new moral order does not reproduce the doctrine of a specific or particular religion, but is instead the expression of a secularised and individualised religion,¹⁰⁷ formed through a work of 'bricolage,' in which a variety of religious and/or philosophical traditions are recycled, combined and remixed, and then presented and utilised as a new legitimising force. The new public morality can therefore be interpreted as a manifestation of the secular trends in society. As it is frequently associated with the individual conceptions of the leader, it is not uncommon to witness

107 Thomas Luckmann developed the idea of an individualised religion in *Das Problem der Religion in der modernen Gesellschaft* (Freiburg: Verlag Rombach, 1963), later translated into English as *The Invisible Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1967). Roberto Cipriani developed the concept of "diffused religion" in a theoretical discussion with Luckmann, see Cipriani, *Diffused Religion* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

a mixture of public religiosity (religiosity in the political sphere) and secularised social trends.

As a consequence of this phenomenon, populism and the secular have a complicated relationship. First of all, such secularising trends don't indicate the disappearance of religion, only its transformation, as Danièle Hervieu-Léger argues.¹⁰⁸ This transformation supports a popular or individualised religiosity, that, in turn, supports a sacralised state or government, which simultaneously seeks political legitimacy among religious groups and a diffused religiosity.

We therefore have a double paradox, whereby in an increasingly secularised society there are populist leaders who reintroduce religion into the public sphere, even though they are themselves an expression of this secularity (thanks to a moral order coming from an individualised religious bricolage). Religion is not introduced openly or straightforwardly, but rather disguised under the cover of 'public morality,' or a new 'moral order,' which can be a revolutionary-Christian popular doctrine, a mythical national-popular creed, or any other worldly transformational ideology or mixed transcendental credo. Therefore, public morality becomes a place in which the secular and the religious can coexist.

It is a truism, but we have to acknowledge that in the same way that we do not find 'religion,' but 'religions,' and not 'populism,' but 'populisms,' there are also many types of 'secularities' and many forms of 'secularisms.'¹⁰⁹ In the cases we have examined, it is clear that populist regimes coexist with institutional religions, albeit in a tense relationship, whilst in many cases simultaneously developing an alternative 'political religion.' This political religion can evolve into more or less secularist positions, depending on the context. The whole process of secularisation allows people to distance themselves from organised religions, instead taking up a faith that is either highly individualised or synthesised in an act of bricolage. In fact, the so-

¹⁰⁸ See this publication, 10n16.

¹⁰⁹ Here I follow the discussions that inform the Multiple Secularities project. See Christoph Kleine, and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, "Research Programme of the HCAS 'Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities,'" *Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities"* 1, Leipzig, 2016. Also Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, and Marian Burchardt, "Revisiting the Secular: Multiple Secularities and Pathways to Modernity," *Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities"* 2, Leipzig, 2017.

called ‘popular religion’ or ‘popular religiosity’ in both Europe and Latin America has always been a type of bricolage, mixing, adapting, and resisting through syncretic behaviours and beliefs. How can we classify these different ways of blending populisms and secularities?

Populisms, we now appreciate, can arise in any kind of society. Inequalities play an important, though not defining, role in their birth and development. This is primarily because inequalities are relative. In the USA or Europe, for example, the inequalities that have created the conditions for populism are the differences between rural and urban, traditional and modern, nativist versus cosmopolitan (or pluralist). These inequalities need not necessarily be economic in nature. In Latin America, by contrast, class, ethnic and economic inequalities have played a greater role in the creation of populisms.

Laicity, the secularity of the political sphere, has many ways of reacting to the various relationships populism forms with religion. It is not always the case that we see religiously inclined populist parties defending religiously conservative positions. In some cases, they can present secularist positions in a covert defence of a hidden religious perspective. For example, regarding the veil and other Islamic garments, the AfD supports the most hard-line secularist positions of French *laïcité*, as does Rassemblement National (the new name of Le Pen’s Front National). The AfD advocates not only the prohibition of the burqa and the niqab, but also proposes that public servants, teachers and students should not be permitted to wear a headscarf, “thereby following the French model.”¹¹⁰

A few years ago, Jean Baubérot and Micheline Milot proposed a typology of laicity, distinguishing ideal types based on concrete and diverse experiences. They highlighted the various forms’ different interpretations of laicity’s core defining elements: freedom of conscience, equality, and the autonomy of politics from religion. The various laicities they defined were: 1) “separatist laicity,” where the idea of separation (between religion and politics, state and church, and public and private) is seen as a goal in itself; 2) “anticlerical laicity,” typical of the cases where religions or churches have dominated social life, provoking a combative reaction against the power of the religious establishment; 3) “authoritarian laicity,” which sees an intervention of the state in the internal affairs of organised religions, and

110 Alternative für Deutschland, “Manifesto for Germany,” 49.

a limitation of freedom of expression and protest; 4) “laicity of civic faith,” where there is implicit pressure on minority religions to culturally integrate and share the values of the religious majority; 5) “laicity of recognition,” which is based on the moral autonomy of each person (central to the notion of freedom of conscience) and gives priority to social justice and to the respect of individual decisions; and 6) “laicity of collaboration,” where the state is considered autonomous from religious authorities, but requests their collaboration in different fields.¹¹¹

If we apply this typology to historical populisms, there could be a debate as to whether there has ever been a true secularity (or laicity) of the political sphere, with potential candidates all having their own ties to religion in some way. The Brazilian Vargas government in the 1930s, for example, established a sort of ‘national Catholicism’ which lasted for at least half a century. If we accept that the regime was a secular and not a Catholic one, however, then we could speak either of a laicity of civic faith or a laicity of collaboration in this case. The case of Argentina is similar, although Peronism did endure a dispute with the Catholic hierarchy over control of social organisations. As in the case of Italian fascism, this dispute led to an end to the collaboration between the populist regime and the hegemonic Church, provoking a final rupture in which a laicity of collaboration gave way to an anticlerical laicity. In the end, however, national Catholicism was deeply ingrained in Argentine culture, and endured for many decades. In some ways, it is still the dominant feature of the system.

The new Latin American populisms also have an oscillatory behaviour. They can swing from being obsequious to Church leaders, to making harsh anticlerical statements and calls for rebellion or for the construction of indigenous churches or doctrines. However, new circumstances have changed the balance of power: the Catholic church, although still wielding great political influence in the region, has, like many other institutions, lost membership and moral authority. Protestantism, evangelicalism, and particularly Pentecostalism, have established a strong footing in the region, increasing politico-religious competition. Other marginalised religions, such as indigenous or Afro-American cults or generalised popular religion,

111 Jean Baubérot, and Micheline Milot, *Laïcités sans frontières* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2011), 87–117.

have also become part of the accepted Latin American religious mainstream. Populist leaders distance themselves from traditional religious institutions, and tend to become a sort of high priest of a new public morality based on a bricolage of mixed religious components. This morality, an expression of post-modern secularity,¹¹² can also vary greatly, insofar as political power is concentrated in a single leader, or in few hands. The regime, impregnated with religious elements, can fluctuate from a secularity of cooperation to an authoritarian or an anticlerical secularity.

In the case of European populisms, the relationship with religion is marked either by reference to a Christian cultural background, which nevertheless gives way to the populists' own understanding of public morality (for example, concerning women or gay rights), or by a focus on rejecting Islamic populations, which are seen as a threat to national and cultural identity. This is why, in most cases, European populisms advocate a secularity (or laicity) of civic faith or one of the anticlerical type. The AfD, for example, seeks to introduce "the French model" in Germany, while Vox promotes a laicity of civic faith, which demands Muslims integrate into Spain's Catholic culture. There is, nevertheless, a misunderstanding at play here: the "French model" far from being a single fixed philosophy, has always been subject to debate.¹¹³ There are some in France who do indeed push for a laicity of civic faith, but there are many others who advocate for a laicity of recognition, and even a few who, following the German model, propose a secularity of cooperation.¹¹⁴

112 The concept of post-modern secularity was debated by many Italian and French scholars at the end of 20th century (for example, J.F. Lyotard or G. Vattimo). A good summary can be found in Stefano Martelli, *La religione nella società post-moderna tra secolarizzazione et de-secolarizzazione* (Bologna: Edizione Dehoniane, 1990), 384–416.

113 A recent example of this is the public debate surrounding the "Observatoire de la laïcité" in France. See Jean Baubérot, "Pourquoi je soutiens l'Observatoire de la Laïcité," *L'Obs*, October 28, 2020, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/idees/20201028.OBS35302/jean-bauberot-pourquoi-je-soutiens-l-observatoire-de-la-laicite.html>

114 See, for example, the debate between Baubérot and Willaime in the ASSR: Jean Baubérot, "Pour une sociologie interculturelle et historique de la laïcité," *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 146 (2009), 183–99, and Jean-Paul Willaime, "Pour une sociologie transnationale de la laïcité dans l'ultramodernité contemporaine," *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* 146 (2009): 210–18.

In the end, populisms, in their plurality, have different ways of approaching religion; using it, integrating it, manipulating it, accepting it or rejecting it, and relating to it in countless other ways. Populist movements and leaderships can also be a product of secularisation, whilst simultaneously enabling the introduction of religion into public, state, or political spheres. The type of political system, political culture, and social structure all have an impact on the secularity of populist movements, as does whether the movements are in power or in the opposition. The possible outcomes are numerous and varied. One constant in populism, however, is that the places of religion and the secular are constantly being redefined. The meanings of religion and the secular, and the boundaries between them, are structurally established, whilst also dynamic, being constantly reshaped by social and political actors.¹¹⁵

115 See, for example, Christoph Kleine, and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, "Research Programme of the HCAS 'Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities.'" *Working Paper Series of the HCAS "Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities"* 1, Leipzig, 2016.

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