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Imbrications of gender and religion in Nordic radical right populism

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ABSTRACT

We examine here how issues of gender and religion are employed for ideological purposes in the discourses of radical right populist parties in Sweden and Finland. We begin with the complexity of these societies as paragons of social welfare and gender equality, within which Lutheran Christianity discreetly underpins their largely secularised character. Employing a poststructuralist methodological approach, we analyse the key political speeches of the chairpersons of the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*) and Finns Party (*Perussuomalaiset/ Sannfinländarna*). We unveil a complex interplay between gender and religion; gender equality is used strategically to strengthen and legitimise the separation between ‘the people’ and racialised Others, while references to religion are employed to rank the racialised Other as ‘less than’ the secular and modern ‘people’, and to oppose alleged inquisitorial attempts on the part of progressive left and liberal parties.

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KEYWORDS Gender; religion; radical right populism; Sweden; Finland

Introduction

Sweden and Finland share deep historical roots (they were one polity until 1809), and an international reputation as gender equal societies with strong welfare states (Hellström 2016; Norocel et al. 2020a). Nonetheless, the two countries differ with regard to their attitude towards gender equality endeavours, proclaimed to be feminist in Sweden (Norocel et al. 2020b; Pettersson 2017), and their reaction to increasing secularism, as manifest through the preservation of state churches in Finland (Saarinen and Koskinen 2021). In Sweden, the idea of ‘gender equality exceptionalism’ is intimately intertwined with the claim to embody a ‘moral superpower’ on the world stage (Norocel 2017; Edenborg 2020). It fuses idealised gender equality efforts, a comprehensive welfare state (synthesised in the concept of the [Swedish] people’s

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home – *folkhem*) (Norocel 2013, 2017), and an ostensibly strong commitment to modernity into discrete markers of Swedishness. Although slightly less self-confident, Finland nevertheless prides itself on having been the first European country to grant women the right to vote, in 1906. More recently, as it has developed a welfare state seemingly committed to gender equality (Holli and Kantola 2007), Finland has consistently been ranking number one on the Global Gender Gap Report, which maps gender equality in different spheres of society (Pettersson 2017). On religious matters, Sweden is frequently presented as one of the most secularised societies in Europe. This is arguably reflected in the demotion of the (Evangelical Lutheran) Church of Sweden from its previous position as state church and the gradual decline in membership to about 56%¹ of the population in 2019 (Svenungsson 2019). Finland shares the legacy of state churches, of which the most important is the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, with a membership of about 69%² of the population in 2019 (Saarinen and Koskinen 2021). Like elsewhere in the Global North, the secularised character of these societies is underpinned by gendered, racist, and religious co-constitutive distinctions (Scott 2018, 3–4), although many of their citizens ‘today are reluctant to recognize the extent to which Protestant norms still influence and organise their purportedly secular societies’ (Svenungsson 2020, 800).

These developments need be understood against the backdrop of contemporary aggressive advances by neoliberalism, manifested as a series of crises during the past two decades: the 2008 global financial crisis, triggered by financial deregulation and corporate greed; the 2015 humanitarian crisis, caused by the failure to address the forced displacement of people across the world; and, most recently, the 2020 public health and economic crisis, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. What these crises seem to have in common is a negative impact that disproportionately affects women and migrant populations (Bergman-Rosamond et al. 2020, 14–15), and the opening up of mainstream politics to radical right populist parties. The radical right populist parties of interest here are the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*, henceforth SD), and the Finns Party (*Perussuomalaiset/ Sannfinländarna*, PS). Both have made significant inroads into parliamentary politics in the past decade, although they have different historical roots – the SD emerged through the fusion of several neo-Nazi organisations and extremist groupings, whilst the PS stemmed from a disintegrating agrarian populist party (Hellström 2016, 39; Sakki and Pettersson 2016, 158). In their discourses, these parties outline sanitised versions of the past, promising an ethnically homogeneous welfare idyll, and glorifying women’s ‘traditional’ subordination to men (Mulinari and Neergaard 2014; Norocel 2010, 2017; Sakki and Pettersson 2016, 2018; Ylä-Anttilla and Luhtakallio 2017; Sager and Mulinari 2018; Pettersson 2019, 2020). Indeed, despite their different origins, the two parties appear to have closed the ideological gap between them. Led by Jimmie

Åkesson since 2005, the SD has strived for ideological normalisation; under the leadership of Jussi Halla-aho (2017–2021), the PS has undergone a reversed radicalising ideological shift (Norocel et al. 2020b). The two parties also have in common an overrepresentation of men, among both their supporters and rank-and-file members, although this is acknowledged as a representativity issue (Norocel 2017, 101; Pettersson 2017, 10). Comparing the way in which issues of gender equality and religion are employed in the discourses of Åkesson and Halla-aho reveals intriguing insights into their efforts to mobilise political support in seemingly similar, yet subtly different, political contexts.

Previous research has examined radical right populism in Northern Europe either by centring on gender (Keskinen 2013; Norocel 2010, 2013, 2017; Mulinari and Neergaard 2014; Pettersson 2017, 2020; Sager and Mulinari 2018), or by emphasising the importance of religion (Nilsson 2020; Svenungsson 2019, 2020; Saarinen and Koskinen 2021). However, comparative studies are few (Norocel et al. 2020a; Sakki and Pettersson 2016; Pettersson 2017; Saarinen 2020). Consequently, we aim to establish a dialogue between these two research streams, evidencing the constraints these parties face when navigating issues of gender equality and Nordic Christianity. Using a methodological approach inspired by Political Discourse Theory (Laclau 2000; Glynos and Howarth 2007), we ask: What are the discursive imbrications of gender and religion in the political speeches of radical right populist leaders in Sweden and Finland?

The article proceeds with six sections. Firstly, we clarify the study's theoretical standpoints, explaining its ideational approach to the study of radical right populism and evidencing those theoretical contributions focusing on gender, with an emphasis on the particularity of the Nordic context. We continue these theoretical clarifications in the second section by examining the intersection between religion and radical right populist ideology. Then, we explain the strategy for collecting empirical material, and detail the study's poststructuralist qualitative methodology. In the following sections, we present the comparative analysis of the discursive ideological work, which was undertaken through two narrative scenarios: the promised fullness-to-come and the doomsday scenario. In the final section, we reflect on both the empirical and analytical implications of the results, contextualising these within the framework of previous research in the field.

Disentangling gender and radical right populism

We study Nordic radical right populist parties from a theoretical perspective emphasising the importance of ideology in understanding populism as the Manichaeon opposition between 'the pure people' and 'a corrupt elite', and the construction of politics as a narrow reflection of the people's will (Mudde

2007, 17). In Europe, populism is juxtaposed with radical right ideology, which emphasises a rigid and punitive interpretation of conventional ethics (Mudde 2007, 23), and overlaps the category of 'the people' with the native ethnic majority, whose ethnic purity and socio-cultural cohesion is threatened by an allegedly unintegrated and racialised migrant Other (Norocel 2013, 44–45; Scrinzi 2017, 136; Spierings and Zaslove 2015, 136–138). Consequently, in this theoretical overview, we focus explicitly on those works that disentangle gender and radical right populist ideology. We are aware, however, that analyses of gender and radical right populism are part of a vast and burgeoning field of scholarship (see, Spierings et al. 2015; Erzeel and Rashkova 2017; Farris 2017).

To begin with, we move beyond the initial definition of radical right parties as *Männerparteien* (Mudde 2007, 90–118), and expand the critical analyses, which describe how openly anti-feminist, anti-LGBT+ rights, and deeply conservative reasoning add further ideological consistency to these parties' xenophobic and at times openly racist, Islamophobic, and anti-democratic appeals (Spierings and Zaslove 2015; Erzeel and Rashkova 2017; Scrinzi 2017; Thorleifsson 2021). Whenever gender issues appear on their political agenda, these parties adamantly defend conservative gender roles and support the traditional family, constructed in opposition to feminist politics, which is framed as a dangerous 'gender ideology' (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017).

Another important theoretical development in feminist scholarship in the field concerns the radical right populist strategy of reshuffling their 'politics of fear' (Wodak 2015), breaking into mainstream politics, and repackaging racist ideas as mere cultural preferences. The two related concepts pertain to the discursive dressing-up of xenophobia as care and love for the family and (native) community, otherwise known as 'care-racism' (Sager and Mulinari 2018); and the selective support and sectarian use of feminism to defend xenophobic attitudes against racialised migrants, also known as 'femonationalism' (Farris 2017). Nordic researchers have argued that a hybrid modern-traditional form, which partially accepts women's aspirations to succeed outside their family homes, contingent upon them continuing to fulfil their expected housework responsibilities, is adopted by these parties mainly as a means to discursively position the 'gender equal' native majorities as superior to allegedly backward and patriarchal migrant Muslim Others (Norocel 2010, 2013, 2017; Sakki and Pettersson 2016; Askola 2017; Edenborg 2020).

Previous analyses of Sweden and Finland have provided detailed accounts of how these parties have adapted their discourses and political strategies to the specificity of these Nordic polities, which combine strong welfare states with outspoken gender equality ambitions. These studies acknowledge manifest Islamophobia, but often do not centre on the role played by Christianity in the ideological constructions of these parties (Keskinen 2013; Mulinari and Neergaard 2014; Sakki and Pettersson 2016; Norocel 2017; Askola 2017;

Pettersson 2017; Ylä-Anttila and Luhtakallio 2017; Norocel et al. 2020b; Sager and Mulinari 2018; Kantola and Lombardo 2019; Pettersson 2020). The idealised picture of 'woman-friendly' welfare states (Borchorst and Siim 2008) has nonetheless suffered several painful readjustments due to the aggressive neoliberal advances in the region. These have entailed welfare retrenchment and privatisation, accompanied by increasingly restrictive citizenship rules and the violent policing of racialised migrants, as well as a significant slowdown of gender equality endeavours, not least as a consequence of the radical right populist parties entering national parliaments (Holli and Kantola 2007; Schierup, Ålund, and Neergaard 2018).

Disentangling religion and radical right populism

By the same measure, the entanglements between religion and radical right populism have only recently attracted the attention of researchers, with studies concentrating on the European context for instance, on France (Roy 2016; Scrinzi 2017), the UK and Hungary (Thorleifsson 2021), and Italy (Ozzano and Giorgi 2016). The imbrications of religion and radical right populism were theoretically organised as either manifestations of the 'sacralization of politics', or as markers of the native (Christian) identity.

Firstly, radical right populism operates a 'sacralization of politics', whereby politics allegedly transcends the mundane nature of political forces in competition to access resources within a polity. Rather, politics is invested with the ability to attain mythical dimensions and 'give ultimate meaning to the life and destiny of communities' (Zúquete 2017, 450). Although such a separation between the mundane and divine is theologically underdeveloped and frequently opportunistic (Svenungsson 2019, 24), radical right populist politics juxtaposes it against the well-researched ideological distinction between a 'morally pure' (homogeneous) people and a 'corrupt and evil' elite. They articulate 'a binary opposition between the sacred (the cause, the leadership, the people), and the profane (those who are opposed to it)' (Zúquete 2017, 451; see also, Marzouki and McDonnell 2016, 2–4; DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 197–180). However, this theoretical construct does not centre on the role played by gender in radical right populism.

Secondly, (Christian) religion is employed by radical right populism as an additional marker of native identity. As such, although the people (and implicitly the radical right populists who claim to represent them) are invested with such sacral attributes, this does not necessarily mean a religious re-consecration of public space. Rather, religion serves as another category to separate 'the people' from their immediate, stigmatised 'others', be they a 'corrupt elite', (Muslim) migrants, or sexual minorities (such as the LGBT+ community) (Scrinzi 2017, 135; Svenungsson 2020, 786; Thorleifsson 2021, 198–199). In the European context, references to specific Christian churches

and heritage abound; however, Christianity functions as a mere indication of a native identity, and less so as a sophisticated set of religious symbols, myths, and rituals, or moral and social values. Thus, these parties may concomitantly claim for themselves the role of representatives of Christian identity, and that of guardians of secularism within public space (Roy 2016, 93; Svenungsson 2019, 24). We argue that this inconsistency towards religion echoes their ambivalence towards gender equality, thus making our study an important contact point between these fields.

Similar patterns were identified by previous research on Sweden and Finland (Haugen 2015; Svenungsson 2019, 2020; Nilsson 2020; Saarinen 2020; Saarinen and Koskinen 2021). Although the Church of Sweden has resisted the SD's advances in the various elections in which it has participated within the church, this did not preclude the SD from positioning itself as defender of the country's 'Christian heritage' (Haugen 2015; Svenungsson 2019; Saarinen 2020), and concomitantly confirming its formal commitment to freedom of religion within a secular society. The party defines itself as a "socially-conservative party with a nationalist foundation".³ The 'Christian heritage', in this context, provides a category diffuse enough to promote exclusionary politics towards racialised (Muslim) migrants, to claim support for gender equality, and concomitantly to oppose the progressive politics of the left-leaning and liberal establishment (Norocel 2013, 148–150; Hellström 2016, 93–99; Nilsson 2020, 146–147; Svenungsson 2020, 801–802).

In turn, the PS proclaim itself 'a patriotic and Christian-social party that promotes the interests of the people'.⁴ The party has had a rather complicated relationship with the Lutheran Church of Finland, and has seemingly embraced secularism (Saarinen and Koskinen 2021). The speeches of former chairperson Timo Soini were nonetheless rife with Christian symbolism and metaphors. Soini was open about being a practicing Catholic, and used this as a device in his effort to sacralise politics, claiming moral superiority over other Finnish party leaders, commanding allegiance among party rank-and-file, and deflecting accusations of harbouring racism in the party (Norocel et al. 2020a). His successor Jussi Halla-aho, in turn, described himself as a non-religious agnostic (Saarinen and Koskinen 2021, 323). This did not prevent Halla-aho or other party members from using Christianity as an identity marker to justify their aggressive stance towards racialised Muslim migrants, as well as to justify their opposition to LGBT+ equal marriage rights in Biblical terms (Keskinen 2013; Pettersson 2017, 2019, 2020). This notwithstanding, to date there have been no comparative critical analyses of how both gender and religion underpin radical right populist ideological constructions in Sweden and Finland.

Empirical material and methodological clarifications

For this study, we analysed key speeches made by Jimmie Åkesson (SD chairperson) and Jussi Halla-aho (PS chairperson) during a politically intense period including the 2018–2019 elections (for the 2018 EU parliament, the 2018 Swedish parliament, and the 2019 Finnish parliament), and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of Åkesson, these speeches were delivered in the context of Almedalen (in 2018⁵; 2019⁶). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Almedalen 2020 was cancelled, so instead we selected Åkesson's speech delivered on the national day, which was uploaded to the SD's official YouTube channel.⁷ In the case of Halla-aho, these speeches were delivered at SuomiAreena (first time as PS chairperson in 2018⁸; 2019⁹). Since SuomiAreena 2020 was similarly cancelled, we chose Halla-aho's First of May speech from the PS's official YouTube channel.¹⁰

We selected these speeches because they fulfill three key criteria: importance, directness, and audience. Firstly, Almedalen is a week-long annual meeting of political parties, lobbyists from various interest groups, and journalists, which takes place on the island of Gotland. It represents the apex of mediatised politics in Sweden, whereby the speeches of party chairpersons are broadcast live by numerous radio and TV stations, and then discussed in the newspapers (Norocel 2017, 96–97; Edenborg 2020, 111). Inspired by Almedalen, SuomiAreena is a key political event in Finland, albeit of smaller ambition than its Swedish counterpart. The discussions among party chairpersons delivered at SuomiAreena are broadcast live by the private TV station co-organising the event (MTV3), and then analysed in the newspapers. To date, there are no analyses in English explicitly focusing on SuomiAreena. Secondly, these speeches allowed the politicians to directly address their audiences, in an engaging and personal manner, circumventing the mediating role of journalists (Norocel 2017, 97; Sakki and Pettersson 2018, 411). Thirdly, the manner of broadcast (via the parties' own YouTube channels, and radio and TV) indicates that the target audiences were both party followers and potential supporters among the wider electorate. Our critical explanation of the topic emerged through close readings of this empirical material. We produced retroductively interpretive hypotheses, which we discussed further among ourselves and then presented to specialist audiences, for the purpose of further assessing and refining our interpretations (Glynos, Klimecki, and Willmott 2015, 395).

We adopted a poststructuralist approach derived from Political Discourse Theory (Laclau 2000; Glynos and Howarth 2007). This enabled a detailed examination of the selected speeches, whilst nonetheless attending to the political contexts in which they are embedded, thereby enabling a socially situated comparative analysis. The key methodological concept is that of 'logic', which concerns the relations between different entities and their

intrinsic characteristics in a given socio-cultural context that makes possible their discursive functioning within that context (Laclau 2000, 283–284). It is structured into three separate interpretive registers: social logics, political logics, and fantasmatic logics. These interpretive registers ‘articulate something about the norms, roles and narratives, as well as the ontological presuppositions that, together, render practices possible, intelligible and vulnerable to contestation’ (Glynos, Klimecki, and Willmott 2015, 395).

Social logics make visible the overriding norms (or rules) of a certain social practice. This notwithstanding, ‘it is important to bear in mind that such “rules” are heuristic tools, enabling us to make sense of a practice, rather than existing externally to and controlling – or for that matter, being merely reducible to – social practices’ (Clarke 2012, 178). Consider the social logic of gender equality within a strong welfare state, which Sweden and Finland share. The ‘rules’ of this social reality posit women as equal to men, within a state that at least declaratively supports them in ascending to positions of power and influence (Borchorst and Siim 2008), such as participation in parliamentary politics, state bureaucracy, and representation among the clergy in their respective Lutheran churches.

Political logics, in turn, serve as ‘organizationally grounded rhetorical tropes that seek to draw equivalences [...] between elements, groups or individuals, in order to establish, defend or contest an existing norm, or to pre-empt the contestation of a norm’ (Glynos, Klimecki, and Willmott 2015, 395). They reduce the social space to two oppositional camps, thereby erasing any other potential differences within these camps. Applied to our cases, we see that the radical right populist parties resort to a discursive oversimplification that posits gender equality as a *fait accompli* within Swedish and Finnish societies, which are now pursuing some ‘pseudo-emancipatory gender policies’ (Wodak 2015, 22, italics in original), and consequently disregards feminist mobilisations to push gender equality beyond its present stage. The opposing camp consists of “bad patriarchies” located in distant places and migrant bodies’ (Keskinen 2013, 226). It overlaps narrowly with the racialised Muslim migrant communities that are accused of ‘cultural incompatibility’, manifested as patriarchal backwardness and religious extremism (Islamism) (Norocel 2017; Sager and Mulinari 2018; Pettersson 2020). Such an antithetical simplification, however, ‘means that any given hegemonic fixation of meaning achieved [in this manner,] can only achieve its hegemonic status by concealing its incompleteness and partiality and will of necessity only be a temporary state of affairs’ (Clarke 2012, 178).

Fantasmatic logics provide ideological consistency, being ‘structured around ideals and obstacles that offer interalia reassurance and hope in relation to widely felt anxieties, thereby facilitating the resumption or transformation of familiar patterns of activity’ (Glynos, Klimecki, and Willmott 2015, 395). Their ideological work consists of contouring an apparently harmonious

and seamlessly functioning whole, focusing on the social logic of a given social practice, rather than admitting the contingent, splintered, and incomplete nature of social reality. This is done with the explicit purpose of subduing political opposition and preventing the consolidation of resistance (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 145–146; Clarke 2012, 179). These fantasmatic logics detail two narrative scenarios. The beatific scenario promises ‘a fullness-to-come once a named [...] obstacle is overcome’ (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 147), and ‘offers promise of social salvation in the form of complete social harmony’ (Clarke 2012, 179). The horrific one delivers a doomsday scenario underpinned by ‘impotence and victimhood’ (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 147), and ‘presents threat in form of specters of inexorable societal decline’ (Clarke 2012, 179). Tracing the fantasmatic logics mobilised by Åkesson and Halla-aho, we have identified the outlines of the fullness-to-come scenario as concerning the safeguarding of gender equality and Christian traditions that would culminate in putting an immediate stop to migration. Concomitantly, we have also distinguished the contours of doomsday scenarios that are linked directly to a failure to do so. This offers a better understanding of the ideological underpinnings at work in their interpretation of social practices and their political logics, mentioned above.

The promised fullness-to-come

The fullness-to-come scenario has diffuse contours in the Swedish material, frequently being articulated as the simple opposite of the present situation. This confrontational political logic posits the ‘left-liberal establishment’ against the SD as the ‘true’ representatives of Swedish people’s interests. Åkesson cemented this interpretation by repeatedly referring to the party and its supposed supporters as ‘friends of Sweden’ (Åkesson 2018⁵, 2019⁶, 2020⁷). This was synthesised in his 2018 speech as: ‘You have demolished the [Swedish] people’s home (*folkhem*); we are building it anew!’ (Åkesson 2018⁵). We interpret this as the active ‘sacralization of politics’ (Zúquete 2017), which invested the SD with the capacity and legitimacy for an almost Messianic task: rebuilding the *folkhem*. At a stylistic level, we noticed that this narrative scenario is not delivered exclusively as an expression of Åkesson’s own opinions. In both his 2019 Almedalen and 2020 National Day speeches, he enlisted two working-class women for the task. One was identified as ‘Laila’, a recently retired social care worker who worried that ‘something is broken’ in Sweden (Åkesson 2019). The other was simply described as one healthcare worker among many others, exhausted by the workload during the COVID-19 pandemic, angry at the healthcare system’s failures, and fed up with the people’s applause, which did not help her pay the bills (Åkesson 2020⁷). We consider that such references to working-class women’s perspectives helped to recalibrate the tone of the radical right’s populist ‘politics of fear’ (Wodak

2015) against the hyper-sexualised figure of the racialised Muslim Other in an expressive articulation of 'care-racism'. This shifts the focus onto women, who are underrepresented among SD supporters, and their care duties for the (Swedish) people (Mulinari and Neergaard 2014; Sager and Mulinari 2018).

Previous analyses of Åkesson's speeches at Almedalen have also documented this discursive strategy, and argued that it enables the SD to claim an interest in welfare politics, and to present themselves as the legitimate political option for the survival of the *folkhem* (Norocel 2017, 102). Åkesson (2018, 2019, 2020) made clear, however, that rebuilding the *folkhem* could only be undertaken as a nationalist project, adding explicitly that: 'Nazism can never be nationalism' (Åkesson 2018), to placate those with concerns about the SD's neo-Nazi roots (Hellström 2016, 39). In turn, nationalism was defined positively as 'Something beautiful that builds [a feeling of] togetherness, of community. Nationalism builds the *folkhem*' (Åkesson 2018).

From our analysis of the Swedish empirical data, we found that Christianity, either as a religious manifestation of Lutheran Christianity or as a simple marker of Swedish identity (Svenungsson 2019; Nilsson 2020), was not enlisted for the task at hand. In our view, this strengthens previous assessments that the SD closely mirrors the predominantly secular character of Swedish society (Svenungsson 2019; Saarinen 2020), and that in Sweden religion serves in radical right populist discourse as an instrument for defining the racialised Other as 'less than' Swedish, rather than for adding nuance to the fullness-to-come scenario.

The outlines of the promised fullness-to-come are even more elusive in the Finnish material. Looking closer, this narrative scenario rests on the idea that the politics of the PS, positioned as they are in complete opposition to the present situation, promise to ensure a future of safety and wellbeing for the Finnish people. In his 2019 speech, Halla-aho drew attention to the 'cottage grandma' (*mökin mummo*) who, when she 'says something bad about the asylum tourists (*turvapaikkaturisteista*) hanging out around the village, is prosecuted and fined for incitement to ethnic or racial hatred' (Halla-aho 2019⁹). We interpret this as an articulation of the 'politics of fear' (Wodak 2015), which pitches the safety of elderly Finnish women as part of the native 'us' against supposedly able-bodied (and male) 'asylum tourists'. It is noteworthy from a gender perspective that Halla-aho specifically recruited the 'cottage grandma', thus an elderly (Finnish) woman, to utter the thinly veiled racist critique of the Other, who is reduced to a position of parasitising Finnish welfare. This echoes Åkesson's discursive strategy to allow women to express their concerns about what is 'broken' in their country, and to present radical right populists as the sole defenders of the native people and 'their freedoms'.

Delivering his 2020 First of May speech as the COVID-19 pandemic raged across the world, Halla-aho concentrated on the threat posed by globalisation to Finnish industries, the dangers entailed by allegedly uncontrolled migration flows, and the impact of Finnish foreign aid on the Finnish economy and welfare. In this context, he accused the government, led by the Finnish Social Democrats, of pursuing an ideologically motivated agenda, by increasing the presently low annual refugee quota and allocating resources for foreign aid at the cost of the wellbeing of Finns. He argued that the PS was better equipped to discern ‘for what and for whom the Finnish state is intended. For us, the primary task of the authorities is to defend the safety and wellbeing of Finland and the Finns’ (Halla-aho 2020). We consider that, despite its brevity, this fullness-to-come scenario operates a sacralisation of radical right populist politics by positioning the PS as morally superior, the only party to ‘truly’ defend the Finnish people and their absolute freedom of speech (even when racist), and to selflessly transcend ideology to fight for the wellbeing of Finns.

The feared doomsday

The negative articulation of the fantasmatic logic is more detailed than the fullness-to-come narrative scenario in Åkesson’s speeches, and takes on apocalyptic proportions. We identified two arguments structuring it. Firstly, the ‘left-liberal establishment’ was accused of abandoning the (Swedish) people, ‘their’ women, and their *folkhem* to the whims of the racialised migrant Other. Illustratively, in his 2018 speech, Åkesson shared with his audience what he was ‘terrified of’:

It’s that sexual crimes, rapes have increased at a frightening rate. That women don’t dare to go out when it’s dark. It’s that only one in five foreign rapists living in Sweden is deported. This is, of course, absolutely horrible. When we get to decide [about such matters], they will all be expelled! What scares me is that in practice the head-covering veil is mandatory for girls in many of the country’s preschools. That thousands, tens of thousands of girls are locked into honor structures and Islamism from an early age. (Åkesson 2018)

We interpret this as a manifestation of the ‘politics of fear’ (Wodak 2015). Swedish women were described as potential victims at the hands of hypersexual ‘foreign [male] rapists’, who go unpunished despite their crimes, because of an over-indulgent judicial system. Women of supposedly migrant background were, in turn, portrayed as defenceless victims at the hands of deeply patriarchal and highly religious male Others, who force them to wear ‘head-covering veils’, and contain them within ‘honor structures and Islamism’ from an early age. In our view, this seemingly confirms the idea of Swedish ‘gender equality exceptionalism’, cementing the claims to moral

superiority of the native majority in their interaction with the ‘less than’ Swedish racialised migrant Others (Sager and Mulinari 2018, 152; Edenberg 2020, 112; Norocel et al. 2020a, 437).

Nevertheless, gender equality rings hollow. Women, irrespective of their ethnic belonging or background, seem capable of only limited agency; they appear to be locked into an unequal relation of dependency towards either Swedish men for protection, or racialised migrant men and their potential sexual aggression and oppression. Furthermore, we interpret the discursive construction of ‘honor structures and Islamism’, one of the few instances in the empirical material in which Åkesson used explicitly religious terminology, as another element aiming to cement the racialised migrant Other’s ‘less than’ Swedish character. In fact, this does not refer to the religion itself (Islam), but rather to one of its extreme manifestations (Islamism), which seems to further solidify the distinction between Swedish people, idealised as exceptionally progressive, rationality-driven, and secularised, and the racialised migrant Other, stereotyped as less modern, less egalitarian, and dogmatically faith-driven (Svenungsson 2019, 25; Edenberg 2020, 112).

Secondly, as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, this narrative scenario entailed a sacralisation of radical right populist politics. Åkesson accused the ‘left-liberal establishment’ of being ‘too slow to react’, and when finally doing so, of acting as though Sweden were a ‘moral superpower’, helping others elsewhere even before caring for their own, thereby displaying their elitist ‘contempt towards the people’ (*folkförakt*) (Åkesson 2020). The causes of this potential martyrdom of the Swedish people were not only the elite’s misguided preoccupation with acting morally towards others, but also their mistaken prioritisation of ‘work with the common ethical foundation (*värdegrundsarbete*) and gender theories when the situation in healthcare and social care, but more generally in the entire welfare state looks as it does’ (Åkesson 2020). This confirms previous findings concerning the radical right’s populist opposition to substantive gender equality policies and social solidarity, which are denounced as mere ‘gender ideology’ (cf. Kuhar and Paternotte 2017, 5; Norocel 2017, 103; Sager and Mulinari 2018, 151–152).

Similarly, thick strokes contour the doomsday narrative scenario in Halla-aho’s speeches. The antagonistic radical right populist political logic is activated along a fault line, which separates the misguided and ideology-driven political establishment from the Finnish people and their ‘true’ defendants (an echo of the party’s name, which in literal translation means true or ordinary Finns), and is invested with an almost religious dimension. In his 2018 speech, Halla-aho employed notions of both religion and gender, arguing that ‘tolerance towards everything is not a European value’, because it threatens ‘the most important achievements of European civilization, such as freedom of religion, secularism, non-discrimination, individual freedom and equality’ (Halla-aho 2018). On the last point, he criticised ‘quotas and

positive discrimination on the basis of gender or ethnic background' as amounting to 'an inquisition' (Halla-aho 2018). Our interpretation is that Halla-aho positioned his party as champions of 'freedom of religion, secularism, non-discrimination, individual freedom and [even] equality' against an almost fanatical political establishment, which had unleashed 'an inquisition' against those opposing 'quota-thinking' (Halla-aho 2018).

In his 2019 speech, Halla-aho expanded this idea further, questioning the boundaries between freedom of speech and hate-speech, a topic contentiously politicised by several PS members, including himself (Keskinen 2013; Petterson 2019, 2020; Norocel et al. 2020a). The discursive strategy in this case was to approach the matter from a perspective positing the superiority of the 'civilized West' in relation to an allegedly backward 'Islamic world', while concomitantly warning of the dangers of an equally dogmatic political establishment:

In the Islamic world, development has ceased due to the lack of freedom of speech. Unfortunately, also in Western Europe development has been worrying in recent years. For us, freedom of speech is not threatened by religious dogmatism, but instead by other sacred cows, such as immigrants, and gender and sexual minorities. (Halla-aho 2019)

Although this speech was directed at Finnish audiences, we consider that the frame of reference here is not exclusively Finnish, unlike Åkesson's speeches wherein Swedish superiority was the focus. Rather, the Finnish people were recruited to a common struggle (supposedly together with likeminded people across the continent) to prevent 'Western Europe' from decaying to the same level as the 'Islamic world', wherein the lack of freedom of speech had stifled development. Surprisingly, then, Halla-aho argued that it is not the 'religious dogmatism', implied to characterise the migrant Other, that is the main danger. The similarity here with Åkesson's line of reasoning is noteworthy, whereby religious belonging (particularly to Islam) is a marker of a 'less than' status. The main threats were instead identified to be 'other sacred cows', namely 'immigrants, and gender and sexual minorities'. In our view, this is an allusion to the 'false gods' looked down upon in Christianity, which serves to discredit the 'left-liberal establishment' as foolish, and dismiss substantive efforts to promote gender equality and LGBT+ rights as 'gender ideology' (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017).

Conclusions

This article has examined the discursive imbrications of gender and religion in the political speeches of the leaders of radical right populist parties in Sweden and Finland. It has engaged in a critical dialogue with theorisations of radical right populism, which focus on two interrelated aspects: the

importance of gender (Spierings and Zaslove 2015; Erzeel and Rashkova 2017; Farris 2017; Scrinzi 2017), and the role of religion (Zúquete 2017; Marzouki and McDonnell 2016; DeHanas and Shterin 2018; Svenungsson 2019, 2020; Nilsson 2020; Saarinen and Koskinen 2021; Thorleifsson 2021). We provided evidence that neither party leader seems to promote gender equality in his speeches; rather, references to gender are exploited as rhetorical tools to strengthen and legitimise radical right populist ideology that separates ‘the people’ from racialised Others. Åkesson referred to female healthcare workers as a means to centre on the *folkhem*’s internal need for care and to whitewash the SD’s lack of support among women, employing discursive devices of ‘care racism’ (Mulinari and Neergaard 2014; Sager and Mulinari 2018). In turn, Halla-aho resorted to the ‘cottage grandma’ and her thinly veiled racist accusation directed against asylees in order to repackage the ‘politics of fear’ (Wodak 2015) as a matter of defending freedom of speech.

Similarly, references to religion were rather scarce in the examined empirical material, but reveal how gender was used to navigate issues of religion and secularism. Whenever deployed, religious references were primarily used to define the racialised Other (as adherents of dogmatic Islam) as ‘less than’ the Swedish/Finnish; and to sharpen the dichotomy between the secularised and ‘modern’ West, and the fanatically religious and ‘backward’ Islamic world (Scott 2018; Svenungsson 2019; Edenborg 2020). Concomitantly, and somewhat surprisingly, another threat to ‘our Western civilization’ was identified in their speeches, this time at the hands of a ‘left-liberal establishment’, that manifested ‘contempt towards the people’ (Åkesson 2020) and embarked upon an ‘inquisition’ in the name of ‘sacred cows, such as immigrants, and gender and sexual minorities’ (Halla-aho 2019). These findings confirm that radical right populist parties in Northern Europe make strategic use of these entanglements between gender and religion inasmuch as they further their political agenda and broaden their appeal to conservative constituencies. It provides further consistency to the empirical articulation of the radical right populist opposition to ‘gender ideology’ (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). This adds complexity to our understanding of the ongoing process of rapprochement between the radical right populist parties and conservative and Christian democratic parties in Sweden and Finland.

We have made these empirical contributions by employing a qualitative poststructuralist approach, which enabled a close examination of the different interpretive registers of discursive logics (Laclau 2000; Glynos and Howarth 2007; Clarke 2012; Glynos, Klimecki, and Willmott 2015). Differently to other qualitative approaches, the focus on fantasmatic logics allowed us to provide detailed accounts of how Åkesson and Halla-aho envision a future in which their political endeavours are successful (the fullness-to-come scenario) or undermined (the doomsday scenario), thus adding an explanatory layer to their present political actions. In this context, we noted the radical

right populist preoccupation with the negative doomsday scenario, painting apocalyptic pictures of the future that awaits ‘the people’, should the ‘leftist-liberal establishment’ continue unchallenged. This seems to be a more rewarding task for both Åkesson and Halla-aho than offering concrete solutions to current pressing needs. The two leaders presented themselves and their parties as the ‘true’ protectors of secular and rationality-driven ‘people’, who cherish ‘their freedoms’ from both misguided elites, and profiteering and menacing racialised migrant Others, stereotypically portrayed as less modern, less egalitarian, and dogmatically religious. This approach allowed us to critically explore how issues of gender equality and religion help to recalibrate and enmesh the ‘politics of fear’ (Wodak 2015) into ‘care racism’ (Mulinari and Neergaard 2014; Sager and Mulinari 2018).

Notes

1. <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/filer/1374643/MedlemsutvecklingLKF.pdf>
2. http://tilastokeskus.fi/tup/suoluk/suoluk_vaesto_en.html
3. <http://partiprogram.se/sverigedemokraterna>
4. <https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/tietoa-meista/arvomaailmamme/>
5. <https://sverigesradio.se/avsnitt/1106033> henceforth referenced as (Åkesson 2018)
6. <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/7259005> (Åkesson 2019)
7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QHvI9SI41U4> (Åkesson 2020)
8. <https://www.mtv.fi/sarja/suomiareena-33001006004/arvopuhe-942240> (Halla-aho 2018)
9. <https://www.mtvuutiset.fi/artikkeli/halla-aho-kertoo-mita-sanavapaus-tarkoit-taa-hanelle-sensuurin-vastustaminen-ei-ole-tyhman-puheen-kannattamista/7483404#gs.d5zo2x> (Halla-aho 2019)
10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VptYM8fE9L8> (Halla-aho 2020)

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