Religion, State & Society

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/crss20

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To cite this article: Tobias Cremer (2022) Defenders of the Faith? How shifting social cleavages and the rise of identity politics are reshaping right-wing populists' attitudes towards religion in the West, Religion, State & Society, 50:5, 532-552, DOI: 10.1080/09637494.2022.2104097

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2022.2104097

Published online: 24 Nov 2022.

RELIGION, STATE & SOCIETY
2022, VOL. 50, NO. 5, 532–552
https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2022.2104097

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ARTICLE

Defenders of the Faith? How shifting social cleavages and the rise of identity politics are reshaping right-wing populists' attitudes towards religion in the West

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ABSTRACT

From the display of oversized crosses at the United States Capitol riots, to a new rhetoric centred on defence of the 'Judaeo-Christian West' in Europe: right-wing populist movements on both sides of the Atlantic are intensifying their use of Christian symbols and language. Many observers have interpreted such rhetoric as symptomatic of a conservative religious resurgence against secular liberalism and multiculturalism. However, several indicators suggest a more complicated relationship between the populist Right, religion, and secularisation. For instance, in the United States Donald Trump was perceived to be the least religious Republican party candidate in recent history, while in Europe church attendance remains a strong predictor for not voting for right-wing populist parties. Deploying a demand- and supply-side framework to understand the socio-demographic roots behind the rise of right-wing populist movements and the motives behind their references to Christianity, this contribution posits that right-wing populists primarily employ Christianity as a cultural identity marker to mobilise voters around a new post-religious identity cleavage. However, they often remain distanced from Christian doctrine, beliefs, and institutions, and instead seek to combine cultural references to Christianity with secular policies, suggesting a secularisation of Christian symbols rather than a resurgence of religion in western politics.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 14 October 2021
Accepted 15 July 2022

KEYWORDS
Right-wing populism; religion; identity politics; nationalism; Trump; secularisation

Introduction

Theoretical approaches to understanding right-wing populists' religious discourse

The pro-Trump rioters parading oversized crosses and 'Jesus saves' flags during the storming of the Capitol in January 2021 were only one recent example of right-wing populist movements' ostentatious references to Christianity. In recent years American and European populist leaders from Washington to Berlin have posed with the Bible in hand for photo shoots, organised rallies in honour of Catholic saints, and presented themselves as the defenders of 'the Christian West' (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016; Cremer 2021a). Such developments are emblematic of two broader trends in western democracies. The first is the rise of right-wing populism, a political movement which prioritises national identity and culture, and which claims that the 'pure and homogenous' people

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are threatened by a neglectful, contemptuous, and corrupted liberal elite from within, as well as by the mass immigration of culturally different 'others' from without (Mudde 2004; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). The second is the resurgence of references to religion – and in particular to Christianity – in the political debate of many countries that were largely perceived as secularised or at least on the path towards secularisation (Norris and Inglehart 2011; Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016; Roy 2019). This contribution seeks to understand the complex links between these two developments and explores the possibility that rather than being driven by resurgent Christian religiosity the rise of right-wing populists and their references to religion are symptoms of a further secularisation of western politics as traditional religious culture wars are increasingly overshadowed by new social cleavage centred around more secular identity politics.

Both the rise of right-wing populism and the return of religious references in politics are often interpreted as 'cultural backlashes' against the liberalisation of cultural norms and the influx of new waves of Muslim immigration (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Some authors have taken this as cause to argue that after decades of its gradual privatisation 'religion is on the rise again' in western politics (Minkenberg 2018, 366) and that religious resurgence was a key driver of right-wing populist politics (Hurd 2015; Minkenberg 2018; Whitehead and Perry 2020). Such arguments represent an important challenge to traditional secularisation theory which had long assumed – and at times teleologically sought to predict – that ultimately all societies would follow Western Europe's example and become less religious and more secular as a result of modernisation (Casanova 2019). While traditional secularisation theory has been repeatedly challenged over the decades by the fact that modernisation in many non-European societies had been accompanied by religious pluralisation or even revival rather than by religious decline (Thomas 2005; Hurd 2015), interpreting right-wing populists' Christian references in the West as symptoms of a religious resurgence challenges secularisation theory's applicability in its original heartland (Minkenberg 2018; Gorski 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Whitehead and Perry 2020).

However, while such an interpretation may appear straightforward in the light of right-wing populists' ostentatious uses of Christian symbols and language and the overwhelming support Donald Trump received from white evangelicals in the 2016 and 2020 elections, several data points complicate the picture. For instance, although a record number of roughly four in five white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump in 2016 and 2020, surveys revealed that during the 2016 Republican primaries Trump initially did best among those Republican voters who never attend church, whereas he significantly underperformed amongst frequent churchgoers (Pew 2016b; Carney 2019). Moreover, many American religious leaders and media outlets, ranging from Episcopalian bishops, through Catholic archbishops, to the evangelical flagship newspaper *Christianity Today*, have loudly criticised Trump's use of religious symbols (Alexander 2016; Galli 2019; Gregory 2020). Even studies that identify white Christian nationalist attitudes as a key driver for Trump's success also show that religious *practice* often correlates with *greater* openness towards immigrants, *more positive* attitudes towards racial minorities, and *higher* levels of tolerance towards religious minorities (Whitehead and Perry 2020, 143). Such ambiguous observations in the United States echo findings in Europe, which show that despite the ostentatious use of religious symbols by Western European right-wing populists, European church leaders have been largely united in their condemnation of the

populist Right. Moreover, among Christians in the pew religiosity has often worked as powerful empirical predictor *against* voting for right-wing populism, with some scholars even speaking of a 'religious vaccination effect' against the populist Right (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016; Daenekindt, De Koster, and Van Der Waal 2017; Cremer 2021a; Siegers and Jedinger 2021).

Contribution and methods

Such paradoxical expressions of the relationship between right-wing populism and Christian communities in western societies raise fundamental questions about the relationship between religion, secularisation, and the rise of right-wing populism: What are the socio-demographic roots of right-wing populist politics in the West, how and why do they seek to use religion, and why do they seem to do so precisely at a moment when levels of religious practice, belief, and association are declining and often particularly steeply in the electorates of right-wing populist parties? This contribution seeks to address these questions by bringing together insights about socio-demographic trends driving the demand for nativist populism in the electorate, with new findings gathered through qualitative research from several dozen elite interviews with right-wing populist politicians and faith leaders in Germany, France, and the United States about how and why the populist Right references religion in its rhetoric.[1] It thereby relies on the demand- and supply-side approach to right-wing populism as advanced by scholars like Kaltwasser et al. (2017). Demand-side factors refer to socio-economic, cultural, demographic, or political conditions that create fertile ground in the electorate for right-wing populist politics. Supply-side factors denote the strategies and actions of political and religious elites that determine right-wing populists' ability to harness this demand.

Overall, the contribution posits that the rise of right-wing populism and its references to religion are less driven by the resurgence of conservative religiosity than by the emergence of a new social cleavage centred on post-religious identity politics on the demand side of western politics. In this context, right-wing populist leaders on the supply side seek to employ a secularised 'Christianism' (Brubaker 2017) as a cultural identity marker of the 'pure people' against external 'others' (in particular Islam), while remaining distanced from Christian values, beliefs, and institutions. These findings suggest a shift in western political systems, where the old faith-driven religious Right is gradually being replaced by a new identitarian and populist Right that is not only more secular in nature but may become a harbinger of further secularisation through its attempts to dissociate Christian symbols from Christian values, beliefs, and institutions.

The contribution proceeds in five steps. After contextualising the research question and introducing the demand-and-supply-side framework in this introduction, the next section turns to the demand side and reviews the phenomenon of right-wing populism in the context of social cleavage theory by exploring the merits of traditional economic or religious explanations for the rise of right-wing populism. In a third step, the contribution explores how the emergence of a new secular 'identity cleavage' may be a more instructive variable in understanding the rise of right-wing populism and its attitude towards religion. In the fourth section the focus is shifted to the supply side and analyses right-wing populist movements' motivations and strategies.

Finally, the conclusion brings demand and supply side back together, contextualises this research's contribution to the literature and points out further avenues of research.

Right-wing populism and social cleavage theory

Populism has undoubtedly become one of the most debated topics in politics, the media, and academia. Given the geographical, theoretical, topical, disciplinary, and epistemological heterogeneity of those who study and talk about populism, many scholars have lamented that 'both the concept and the word have lost most of their heuristic utility' (Mény and Surel 2002, 2). This is not helped by the tendency in politics and the media to use 'populism as a "*Kampfbegriff*", where it is largely used synonymously with opportunism or demagogy and 'reserved for the political "enemy"' (Bale, van Kessel, and Taggart 2011, 127). Nevertheless, there is a growing academic convergence around defining populism either as a discursive style or as an ideology (DeHanas and Shterin 2018). This contribution follows the ideational approach because it allows to systematically relate populism to other ideologies and systems of beliefs such as liberalism, nationalism, and religion and because it sets clear boundaries for what can be defined as populism (Mudde et al. 2017; Hawkins et al. 2018). It thereby adopts Albertazzi and McDonnell's ideational definition of right-wing populism as 'a thin-centred ideology, which pits a virtuous and homogenous people against a set of elites and dangerous "others" who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights and values, prosperity, identity, and voice' (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2015, 5). Yet regardless of whether one adopts discursive or ideational definitions, scholars agree that right-wing populism in particular is at its core about two distinctions; one in a vertical, and the second in a horizontal dimension (DeHanas and Shterin 2018). The first horizontal distinction is based on Mudde's characterisation of populism as being about the juxtaposition of the 'pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite' and the idea that politics should be an expression of the *volunté generale* of the people (Mudde 2004, 543). In the case of 'right-wing' populism, this horizontal relationship of 'the pure people' and 'the corrupted elite' needs to be further expanded by a second vertical distinction: between the 'pure and homogenous us' and the 'external other' (see Figure 1). In fact, what distinguishes right-wing populism from other populisms is its tendency towards 'nativism'; that is the view that 'states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ("the nation") and that non-native elements are fundamentally threatening the homogenous nation-state' (Mudde 2007, 19; Casanova 2012). One key proposition of this contribution is that in the context of this triangular worldview, right-wing populists use religious references as an *ex negativo* identity marker of the 'pure and homogenous people' against the (Islamic) 'external other', rather than as a positive reference to Christian values, beliefs, and institutions (see also Schwörer and Fernández-García 2021; Schwörer and Romero-Vidal 2020). It also posits, however, that through such identitarian uses of religious identity right-wing populist politicians are responding to a crisis of identity in the majority population on the demand side of western politics and specifically to the emergence of a new social cleavage centred around identity, which in turn is fuelled by developments such as globalisation, individualisation, rapid ethnic change, and

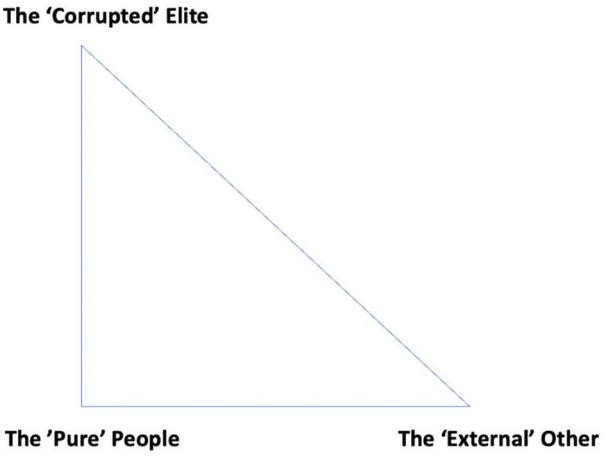

Figure 1. Right-wing populists' triangular worldview.

secularisation. To better conceptualise right-wing populism in the context of major recent social, demographic, and religious shifts on the demand side, a re-evaluation of social cleavage and secularisation theory are auspicious tools.

First conceptualised by Lipset and Rokkan in 1967, social cleavages refer to the main social divides within a society that shape and define the political system and the parties that populate it (Lipset and Rokkan [1967] 1990; Bornschier 2010). They typically develop out of major social or political upheavals that impact large parts of the population and divide them up into beneficiaries and losers of these developments (Kriesi 2008). Lipset and Rokkan argue that, historically, western democracies have been divided by four critical cleavage lines: the centre versus the periphery; the state versus the church; the land versus industry; and owners versus workers (Lipset and Rokkan [1967] 1990, 101). Kriesi has argued that in modern-day politics this system 'essentially boils down to two dimensions: a cultural (religion) and a social-economic one (class)' (Kriesi 2008, 11). As a result, throughout the twentieth century, politics in western societies was mainly dominated by economic questions about redistribution, taxation, and class relations, as well as by social issues such as abortion, church-state relations, and sexual freedom (Lipset and Rokkan [1967] 1990; Bornschier 2010).

The traditional party systems of most western democracies, which have 'instrumental and representative functions' in mirroring social cleavages, have largely been ordered according to these fault lines (Lipset and Rokkan [1967] 1990, 93). Mainstream conservative parties, for instance, have typically represented capitalists on the economic cleavage and the church or social conservatism on the moral cleavage, whereas progressive or left-wing parties have represented the interests of the secular state and the working-class. Throughout the twentieth century these party systems have proven remarkably resilient, thanks to the organisational advantages of established parties, and to their strategic alliances, which have prevented split-offs and narrowed new parties' mobilisation potential (Kriesi 2008). In recent years, however, this organisational advantage seems to have reached its limit. Since the 1990s scholars have observed a 'thawing' of the Western European party system (Taggart 1996), with new parties emerging both on the Left and

on the Right of the political spectrum, and a shrinking of the old mainstream parties. Some of the main beneficiaries of this fragmentation have been right-wing populist movements, who in the decade between 2006 and 2016 have doubled their share in European parliamentary seats and tripled their absolute share of votes (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019).

Scholars have emphasised that institutional supply-side factors such as national electoral systems may significantly impact the speed and extent of this transformation process (Kriesi 2008; Bornschier 2010). For instance, while electoral systems based on proportional representation (PR) allow for a more direct translation of shifting demand-side patterns into new parties, Duverger's law predicts that majoritarian or First Past the Post (FPP) voting systems disproportionately favour established two-party systems and disadvantage new party formations (Cox 1997). As a result, populist movements are more likely to express themselves in PR-voting systems through the rise of separate and new populist parties, which is illustrated through the rise of such new parties across Western European countries (Kaltwasser et al. 2017), whereas such new parties are less likely to succeed in FPP systems. However, the fact that even in countries such as the United States or Britain, where the electoral system strongly favours established parties, new populist grassroots movements have challenged the traditional party systems from the inside, for instance, by transforming parties like the Conservative party in the UK or the Republican party in the United States, suggests that shifts on the demand side are the main drivers for right-wing populists' success across different systems (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Sobolewska and Ford 2020).

When exploring the demand-side explanations for the rise of right-wing populism, most scholars have focused on changes along traditional economic and cultural/religious cleavages. For instance, the importance of neoliberal economics in right-wing populist parties' programmes became 'conventional wisdom' in much of the populism literature at the turn of the millennium (Mudde 2007, 120). However, there has been little empirical evidence that a focus on neoliberal economics is a widespread feature of contemporary right-wing populist parties (Mudde 2007; Norris and Inglehart 2019). On the contrary, in its latest wave, right-wing populist proponents like Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, or the 'Vote Leave' Brexit movement campaigned on a platform of anti-globalism, protectionism, big-state social welfare and infrastructure programmes – policies that were traditionally put forward by the Left (Perrineau 2017; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018).

In response, some scholars have placed right-wing populists on the anti-free trade side of the economic cleavage, arguing that contemporary right-wing populist movements reflect an economic backlash against rising levels of inequality (Perrineau 2017; Rodrik 2018). The 'rust-belt revolt' of former blue-collar Democrats in the United States' 2016 presidential election and the abandonment of many centre-left parties in Europe by their traditional working-class electorate are often cited as symptoms of this development (Fourquet 2019). Yet this account, too, seems insufficient: not only because it fails to account for the rising role of religion in right-wing populist rhetoric, but also because its claims about the centrality of the economic cleavage seem not borne out by recent election data. Rothwell and Diego-Rosell (2016), for instance, have shown that most Trump supporters were relatively unconcerned about their personal economic situation, while economic issues have been ranging comparatively low on the priority lists of right-

wing populist voters in Western Europe, too (Kaltwasser et al. 2017; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). Mudde, therefore, concluded that 'economics is not a primary issue to the party family' (2007, 136).

Given this lack of evidence for the centrality of the economic cleavage to the rise of right-wing populism, more and more scholars have focused on the second traditional political cleavage in the west: the cultural/religious cleavage. Norris and Inglehart, for instance, interpret right-wing populism as a 'cultural backlash' against a progressive value change on social issues (Norris and Inglehart 2019). This implicitly places phenomena like Trumpism, Brexit, and the rise of the populist Right in continental Europe in the context of traditional 'culture wars' that have raged in the United States for decades, mainly between Christian conservatives and secular liberals (Gorski 2019; Whitehead and Perry 2020). This view appears substantiated by well-researched studies suggesting a strong relationship between 'white Christian nationalism' and far-right politics in the United States (Whitehead and Perry 2020). Moreover, right-wing populists' own rhetoric seems to push towards the same conclusion (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016; Roy 2019).

However, a closer look at national populists' policy stances, leaders, and voters suggests that taking such rhetoric at face value and equating the new identity politics of the populist Right with America's religious culture wars of the past would imply a false conflation of religious traditionalism and secular authoritarianism. Indeed, Daenekindt, De Koster, and Van der Waal argue that whilst across most of the literature these 'cultural issues are considered interchangeable', in reality, these two components of 'right-wing' positions are quite distinct (Daenekindt, De Koster, and Van Der Waal 2017, 792). As this contribution's supply-side analysis of right-wing populist policy positions and public discourse reveals, many right-wing populist parties actually combine authoritarianism and anti-immigration policies with culturally more 'liberal' stances on social issues such as gay marriage, gender equality, or the separation of church and state (De Koster et al. 2014; Brubaker 2017; Roy 2019; Cremer 2021d). The French National Rally (*Rassemblement National*, RN),[2] for instance, presents itself as chief guardian of *laïcité*, has remained notably absent from the French 'Manif Pour Tous' demonstrations against gay marriage,[3] and helped organise gay pride parades (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016; Perrineau 2017; Roy 2019), whilst the Dutch Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV) claims to be the party for gay rights and gender equality (De Koster et al. 2014).

While we will dive more deeply into these supply-side developments in the final section of this contribution, when thinking about the relationship between right-wing populism and the traditional religious cleavage a look at the demand side and the socio-demographic profile of right-wing populists' key constituency – the white working-class – is similarly revealing (Olsen 2017; Piketty 2020). The latter is secularising at a much faster rate in Western Europe and North America than their white-collar compatriots and minority communities (Wilcox et al. 2012; Perrineau 2017; Fourquet 2019). As a result, Putnam and Campbell's observation that 'if you listen carefully, hymns in American houses of worship are increasingly sung in upper-class accents' can also be applied to European contexts, where congregations are becoming increasingly well-educated, middle-class, and female (Campbell and Putnam 2011, 253).

Such socio-demographic differences are also mirrored in empirical voting behaviour. Thus, a growing number of studies have found a negative correlation between religiosity and support for right-wing populism (Montgomery and Winter 2015; Carney 2019;

Cremer 2021a; Siegers and Jedinger 2021). Montgomery and Winter speak of a 'Religion Gap in Support for Radical Right Parties in Europe' (Montgomery and Winter 2015, 379) and Arzheimer (2009), as well as Siegers and Jedinger (2021) found a 'vaccination effect' of religion on practising believers against supporting national populism. Right-wing populist voters tend to be disproportionally irreligious and to care comparatively little about social issues such as traditional family values, abortion, gay marriage, or church and state relations in Europe (Kaufmann 2018). Similarly, in the United States' 2016 presidential elections, abortion – traditionally at the top of conservative voters' motives – ranked second to last in electoral motivations, and issues such as gay marriage did not even make the list (Pew 2016a; Kaufmann 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019). Trump's early hardcore supporters also tended to be significantly less conservative on social issues than supporters of earlier conservative grassroot movements such as the tea party, or the Christian Right (Pew 2016b; Carney 2019). Trump's ultimate success among white evangelicals has shown, however, that the extent to which such attitudinal differences translate into electoral 'religious immunity' in the long run strongly depends on supply-side factors such as the institutional settlement of state-church relations, the availability of party alternatives, and the behaviour of religious leaders (Cremer 2021a). Still, Donald Trump's triumph in the primaries, despite evangelicals' initial reluctance to vote for him, suggests that rather than representing a resurgence of the Christian Right Trump's success may be heralding the rise of the 'post-religious Right' in its stead (Kaufmann 2018; Cremer 2021d).

Overall, the recent surge of national populist movements and their use of religion seem to be neither primarily an expression of an economic 'class struggle' nor symptomatic of a religiously motivated 'culture war'. Instead, this contribution explores the possibility of a new social cleavage centred around identity politics driving the demand for national populist politics, in whose context, religious belonging – though less so religious believing – can be used politically as a secularised cultural identity marker.

From class struggles and culture wars to the clash of civilisations: the emergence of the new identity cleavage

Polls and empirical studies suggest that in many western countries concerns about immigration, national culture, and ethnic identity increasingly trump economic, social, or moral issues in many voters' motivations. Sobolewska and Ford (2020) have shown, for instance, that immigration and a new 'identity conflict' between 'identity liberals' and 'identity conservatives' were the key drivers for 'Leave' voters in the Brexit referendum and the subsequent transformation of Britain's political landscape (Sobolewska and Ford 2020). Similarly, 'refugees and foreigners' were the chief concern for voters in the 2017 German federal election (Dostal 2017). This trend is even more evident when looking at right-wing populist voters. In the 2017 French presidential election, 80% of FN voters ranked 'immigration' as the most important electoral issue, placing it way above economic concerns such as unemployment or social questions such as gay marriage (Perrineau 2017). The same trend can be seen amongst Trump voters who rated 'immigration', 'respect' and 'race relations' amongst the top motives for their choice (Pew 2016a; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019).

As a result, there is a growing body of literature suggesting that an important part of the electorate is beginning to think less in terms of class struggles, or culture wars, and more in terms of a new contest over the status of ethno-cultural, racial, and civilisational identities of majority populations in the West (Brubaker 2017; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Kaufmann 2018; De Wilde et al. 2019; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019). At the same time there is also a sizeable and outspoken part of the population – including most of the economic and political 'elite' – that fundamentally oppose such nationalist or civilisational interpretations of identity and fervently embrace globalist ideals of individualism and diversity instead (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; De Wilde et al. 2019). This group, too, is concerned with identity yet instead of inherited national or ethnic group identities, their focus – at least for the ethnic majority – is on individualist achieved identities such as education, professional success, and personal commitment to liberal, cosmopolitan, and multicultural values. As a result, observers speak of a new divide between 'Somewheres' and 'Anywheres' (Goodhart 2017), 'Sedentaries' and 'Nomads' (Fourquet 2019), 'Nativists' and 'Globalists' (Piketty 2020), 'Communitarians' and 'Cosmopolitans' (De Wilde et al. 2019), or 'Identity Conservatives' and 'Identity Liberals' (Sobolewska and Ford 2020). Whilst these terms are varied, each one points to the question: how to define the 'us' and the 'other' in times of rapid social and demographic change. Who may belong and who may not? This is the core of the new identity cleavage, which is reshaping the old cleavage system (see Figure 2).

The roots of this renewed questioning of collective identity stem from several sources on the international and domestic level. At the international level, in particular factors such as immigration and rapid ethnic change have moved questions about how to define national identity into the centre of the political debate (Kaufmann 2018). Meanwhile, authors like Casanova, Betz and Meret, and Brubaker point to a link between Muslim immigration and the resurgence of religion as a cultural identifier in western political discourse, often in the form of Islamophobia (Betz and Meret 2009; Casanova 2012; Brubaker 2017). Islamist terrorism further exacerbates this tendency, as it is often portrayed and perceived as an outside attack of an uncivilised 'other' on 'us'. Finally, international integration and supra-national institutions push the public debate towards a focus on questions of national

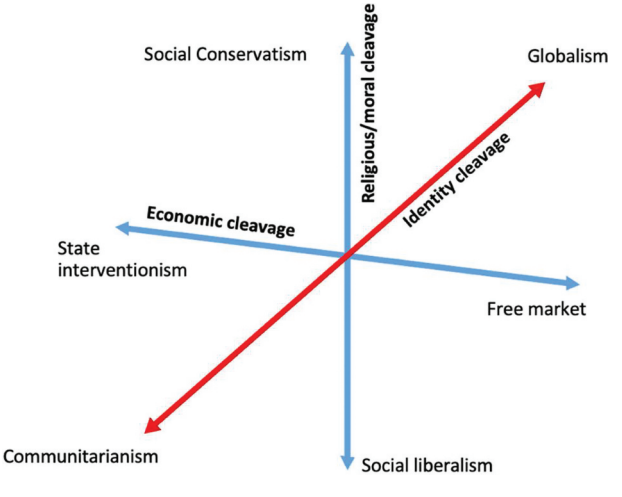

Figure 2. The new identity cleavage.

identity, by appearing to threaten national sovereignty from above and pitting national forms of identity against new globalist ones. Such international developments have confronted many western societies with the question of how to define 'us' and 'them'. However, the reasons for why western societies are so divided in answering these questions, seem to lie in the erosion of traditional group identities on the national level.

At the root of this erosion are increasing levels of individualisation, modernisation, and secularisation (Reckwitz 2018). Sociologists have observed for several decades that growing levels of individualisation coincide with a lower identification with collective institutions and a decreasing willingness to commit to groups (Putnam and Campbell 2012; Fourquet 2019). This phenomenon ranges from labour unions, and political parties, all the way to social clubs, youth associations, and marriages. However, for this contribution the two most relevant group identities in decline are those related to the traditional economic and cultural cleavages: class and religion. The decline of class identity is primarily due to processes of technological modernisation and digitisation, the spread of secondary education, and the rise of meritocracy, which are transforming the economy and breaking open the old class divide. Although generally seen as positive developments, some authors have highlighted their social costs in terms of lost collective identities and social structures (Goodhart 2017; Sandel 2020). The erosion of class identities is extensively discussed in politics as it is widely seen as the cause for the decline of working-class voting for centre-left parties, and blue-collar voters defection to right-wing populist groups (Fourquet 2019). Yet, the loss or transformation of religious identity through the process of secularisation is equally important for understanding the emergence of the new cleavage and the rise of the populist Right.

Although religious resurgence scholars have been right in pointing out that religion has far from disappeared from world politics, studies show that individual faith and religious practice continue to be in rapid decline in the West (Norris and Inglehart 2011; Carney 2019; Fourquet 2019). In many countries, most notably the United States, secularisation seems to be only now gathering momentum, with those professing no faith at all for the first time outnumbering any single religious group in 2016 (Pew 2016c, 2019). In other traditionally Christian societies such as Britain, France, or Germany, Christians are projected to soon become the minority if they have not already done so (Pew 2016c, 2018). Though scholars are divided as to whether individual spirituality will take the place of formal religiosity, Putnam and Campbell predict a significant loss of social capital associated with this decline of institutionalised religion, especially among the white working class where secularisation is progressing most rapidly and where communities were often most dependent on religious institutions as cost-free providers of social cohesion and belonging (Putnam and Campbell 2012). Zúquete (2017) and Fourquet (2019) even speak of the collapse of the social matrix of society and the subsequent emergence of a social and spiritual identity vacuum on the individual level that can readily be exploited by political actors such as right-wing populists.

Yet, for this research, at least as important as the potential disappearance of religious identity because of secularisation is its transformation into a cultural rather than religious concept; into a form of belonging rather than believing. Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy have emphasised that in many societies the decline of individual religiosity paradoxically coincides with an increased emphasis on 'Christian culture' and 'heritage' in public discourse (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016; Roy 2019). Scholars have sought to understand such paradoxical developments through the distinction between religious belief and religious

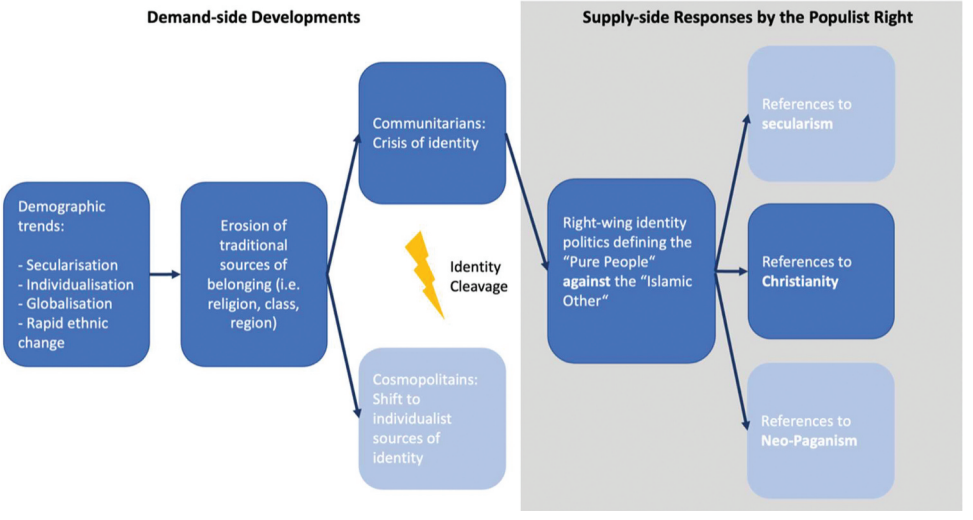

Figure 3. Demand-side sources of the new identity cleavage and supply-side responses.

belonging (Casanova 2012; Brubaker 2017; Roy 2019), which, having been inseparably intertwined for centuries, increasingly appear as distinct phenomena. 'Believers without belonging' are individuals who self-identify as 'spiritual but not religious' and subscribe to much of the general Christian doctrine, yet without committing to the social institution of a church. Conversely, 'belongers without belief' are individuals who may identify with the cultural heritage of a particular faith, its symbols, language, and derived rules in society (belonging), but do so without identifying with its values, beliefs, and institutions (believing). This phenomenon is well articulated by the German term '*Kulturchrist*' ('cultural Christian') and while it has historically been more prevalent in Europe, recent trends around the emergence of 'cultural evangelicals' in the United States, who identify as 'white evangelicals' for cultural or political reasons yet without adopting evangelical beliefs or practices, suggest a gradual Europeanisation of America's historically more faith-driven politics in this respect (Burge 2020).

Such a culturalisation or even secularisation of religious identity shows that although commitment to religion or class may be waning, the yearning for group identities is not. While the cosmopolitan part of the population embraces new individualist forms of acquired identities, secularisation, individualisation, and rapid ethnic change seem to have created a crisis of collective identity in the communitarian part of population and new demand for identitarian political entrepreneurs to harness (see Figure 3). A look at the supply side can help us understand how right-wing populists seek to use religious references to capitalise on this new demand.

The supply side: right-wing populists and religion in the new game of identity politics

When looking at the political supply side to understand whether and, if so, how right-wing populists can capitalise on the emergence of the new identity cleavage and use religion to do so, the key question is what group identities they seek to appeal to and

which aspects of religion they use to do so. Scholars have noted that right-wing populists capitalise on voters' concerns about national identity and immigration by using a new form of right-wing identity politics, which emphasises ethno-national identities over traditional class or religious identities (Kaufmann 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019). This right-wing identity politics is not simply to be equated with traditional racism based on a biological racial hierarchy. Rather, it is built on the 'ethno-pluralist' doctrine of 'equal but different', which holds that particular nations, cultures, or ethnic groups have the right to defend their cultural differences (Kaufmann 2018). This new identity politics of the Right to an extent seeks to mirror but reverse the identity politics of the Left, by emphasising racial, cultural, or sexual identity as drivers of political action, but reversing the roles and claiming to defend the rights of the ethnic majority rather than those of minorities (Kaufmann 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019). However, one critical distinction between left-wing and right-wing identity politics is the latter's claim that the ethnic majority's cultural norms and identity should enjoy a pre-eminent or even hegemonic position within society. Within the boundaries of national community there is, hence, an expectation for minorities to assimilate themselves into the majority's *Leitkultur* ('lead-culture') (Kaufmann 2018; Jardina 2019).

Appealing in such ways to the majority's ethno-cultural group identity is of strategic value for right-wing populists for two reasons. Firstly, ethno-cultural identities are sufficiently vague as to appeal to a large part of the otherwise increasingly fragmented and individualised population. The second advantage is that formulating this appeal in terms of identity politics resonates with the mainstream rhetoric about the importance of (minority) group rights, including common perceptions of (in-)justice and victimhood narratives (Jardina 2019). In this context, many members of the majority population feel 'left out' by the identity politics of the Left, which is perceived as defending the group rights of minorities but undermining those of the majority (Kaufmann 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019). They are therefore often susceptible to ethnically chauvinistic policies that appeal to feelings of victimhood and decline.

To better understand the role religion can play in the context of this new brand of right-wing identity politics, let us recall our definition of the right-wing populist worldview in terms of a triangular relationship. On the one side is the pure and homogenous people (the 'us'), and on the other side a set of two 'others' who threaten the people's identity: the internal other – the corrupted liberal and cosmopolitan elite – who erodes the people's identity and cohesion from the inside, and the external other who threatens the people's homogeneity through their cultural 'otherness' from the outside (see Figure 1). One way to use religion in this context is through the sacralisation of politics against the internal other. Arato (2013) and Zúquete (2017), for instance, show that secular concepts such as territory, the population, immigrants, and political elites are systematically 'theologised' in right-wing populist rhetoric into 'the sacred homeland', 'the pure people', 'the dangerous others' and 'the corrupted elite'. Similarly, populists' Manichaean distinction between the 'pure' people and the 'corrupted' elite or 'dangerous' other reflects religious concepts of good and evil (Arato 2013). This construction of the 'good people' as 'a moral community' (Zúquete 2017, 458) also endows the General Will with 'godlike dignity uniting power and justice', whereas anyone who would want to restrain it becomes a heretic of democracy (Arato 2013, 145).

However, the employment of religious language and symbols as secularised cultural and civilisational identity markers of the 'us' against the 'external other' appears to be of even greater relevance in right-wing populist identity politics. Indeed, one of the key developments over the last few decades has been that whereas historically the differentiation between the 'pure people' and the 'external other' on the horizontal axis had been made based on race, ethnicity, and nationality, since the 2000s this distinction has increasingly been made on the basis of religious and civilisational characteristics. José Casanova (2012, 489) for instance emphasised that:

> Only a few decades ago immigrants from Turkey in Germany were viewed as Turks and not as Muslims, immigrants from Pakistan in the UK were viewed as Pakistani and not as Muslims, and immigrants from the Maghreb in France were viewed as Moroccans, Algerians or Tunisians, or generally as Maghrebis, and not as Muslims. But today throughout Europe immigrants from Muslim countries are not only primarily classified as Muslims, but they have come to represent 'Islam' with all the baggage.[4]

In right-wing populists' triangular worldview, in which the 'us' is largely defined *ex negativo* in relation to internal and external others, this definition of 'the other' in terms of religion and culture as 'Islamic', appears to have facilitated Christianity becoming an analogous identity marker of the 'us' (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016, 5). During the elite interviews I conducted with religious and populist leaders, several right-wing populist politicians made this dynamic explicit. One interviewed senior Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) politician for instance explained that:

> in the AfD the consensus is that when we say 'Christian' or 'occident' we mean it in historical and cultural terms rather than in theological terms. It's about defending our culture against other civilisations and the threat of Islam.

A leader of the French Rassemblement National similarly stressed that for them:

> The religious question will necessarily be central, but it will be in relation to the question of political Islam; and perhaps in relation to political Islam, there will be a will to defend what defines us; and when it comes to what identifies us today it is still hard to avoid Christian identity.

These comments were representative of the elite interviews more broadly, many of which revealed a stark difference between mainstream party leaders' and faith leaders' conceptualisations of Christian identity on the one hand and that of right-wing populist leaders on the other. Thus, whereas almost all of the 75 interviewed church officials and mainstream party politicians in Germany, France, and the United States referenced primarily aspects of Christian believing (such as Christian values, anthropology, or theological concepts about sinfulness, the Trinity or the resurrection), most of the 31 right-wing populist leaders focused overwhelmingly on Christianity as a form of national and cultural belonging (referencing history, architecture, music, traditions, and territory) and as a contrast point against the Islamic 'other' (Cremer 2021b). Such findings closely align with those of scholars like Rosenberg (2021) or Schwörer and Fernandez-Garcia (2021), whose analyses of right-wing populists' speeches and manifestos revealed that whereas 'Christian Democratic parties prioritise positive association with a religious-in group (i.e. Christianity), nativist parties prioritise policing the nationality myth through exclusive references to a religious-out group' (specifically Islam) (Rosenberg 2021, 35),

and that 'excluding Muslims seems to be a much more salient communicative content for the radical right than praising Christianity' (Schwörer and Romero-Vidal 2020, 1168).

The fact that such use of Christianity as a culturalised identity marker against Islam does not necessarily amount to a resurgence of religiosity in western societies is also clear from the analysis of right-wing populist manifestos and elite-interview material, which suggests that right-wing populist movements often use Christian traditions, symbols, and language without necessarily committing to Christian doctrine, ethics, or institutions. Scholars have pointed in particular to clashes between Christian doctrine and right-wing populists' traditional closeness to neopaganism, as well as to their positions on immigration, national identity, and Islam, which openly clash with European churches' universalist and pro-immigration positions (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016; Elcott et al. 2021). The results from the interviews confirmed these findings with, for instance, one AfD grandee explaining that for the nationalist wing of the party 'it's not about Christianity and not even about cultural-Christendom, but about a Germanic tribal society [. . .] Germanic paganism plays a huge role for these people'. A former FN MP who is Catholic similarly explained that 'it was not easy for me in the FN (as a Christian), because there were many who objected to my vision – in particular those who would be defined as the neopagan New Right'. Right-wing populist politicians were similarly candid about their conflict with the Christian churches on the question of immigration, with one senior RN leader explaining that 'the Church is a global accomplice of global migration and in this context the RN does not hesitate to criticise the Church', while several interviewed Catholic bishops stressed that 'the RN itself rejects any association with Catholicism', that 'the leaders of the RN clearly set themselves up against the word of the bishops'.

However, there are also often overlooked conflicts on moral and societal issues as well as secularism. In France, for instance, Marine Le Pen's RN has remained pointedly absent from demonstrations against gay marriage, embraced a liberal position on abortion, posed as the main defender of LGBTQ and women's rights against Islam, and advocated for a more radically secularist reading of *laïcité* (Almeida 2017; Cremer 2021d). Meanwhile in Germany, the AfD has adopted increasingly secularist stances designed to curtail the public influence and visibility of religion at the expense of Germany's religion-friendly system of benevolent neutrality (Cremer 2021c; Elcott et al. 2021). The elite interviews strongly supported this impression, with right-wing populist participants being on average significantly more secularist in their views on church-state relations and the public role of religion than mainstream conservative or even centre-left politicians. One prominent AfD leader, for instance, confirmed the existence of a 'faction of radical atheists in the party', while another shared their experience as a Christian in the party saying that:

> There are many people in the AfD who outwardly say that Christianity is extremely important to them and that they are Christian themselves but who internally always fought the Christians in the party [. . .]. They really wanted to destroy us. For these people Christianity is really a religion from the Near East, which does not fit into Germany.

Several French RN leaders similarly spoke of a 'very strong secularist current in the RN', while others criticised Catholic bishops as 'conformists, pharisees and cowards' or claimed that 'a French bishop should shut his mouth on political questions [. . .] he should shut up and care for his flock and his Church [. . .] we need to more severely apply the rules of *laïcité à la française* here'.

Such secularist tendencies observed in the German AfD and French RN appear representative of other Western European countries such as the Netherlands, Austria, or Denmark where national populists capitalise on the emerging distinction between 'belief' and 'belonging' to link cultural Christian belonging to the ethno-cultural majority identity, whilst dissociating it from Christian doctrine and institutions (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016; Almeida 2017; Roy 2019; Elcott et al. 2021; Ozzano 2021). Even in the United States, Donald Trump and Steve Bannon have embraced a more European-style identarian discourse that not only clashed with American churches' positions on immigration, but also openly rejected traditional American civil religious rhetoric, favouring instead a secularised white Christian nationalism (Gorski 2019; Haynes 2019). Interviewed leaders in the American national populist movement confirmed, for instance, that for the Trump campaign, '"taking back our country" now doesn't mean Christianity in the way that it meant in the eighties. Now it means nationalism. So, it's less religious and more political. There's no doubt about that'. A member of Donald Trump's faith advisory board, moreover, reported infighting between the new secular populist Right and the traditional religious Right, stating that 'Steve Bannon was trying to get some evangelicals out of the White House, but I would say that evangelicals played a role in getting him out of the White House'. Certainly, the 'post-Christian Right' does not appear to be as powerful within the Republican party as within Western European right-wing populist parties, where some reports find targeted marginalisation of Christian voices through secularist or neopagan currents, and where the relationship with institutional churches is characterised by open hostility. Still, Trump's transactional (and at times openly antagonistic) relationship with America's faith leaders suggests that such tendencies might become more common because of the gradual secularisation and Europeanisation of the American Right.

Conclusion

This contribution set out to understand the ambiguous relationship between religion and right-wing populism in western democracies. To do so it distinguished between demand-side factors in the electorate and supply-side factors in the political sphere. On the demand side the contribution has employed social science theory about social cleavages, individualisation, and secularisation to understand the change of the traditional party system, the new demand for right-wing populist parties, and the return of religion to public rhetoric, arguing that they are less the result of a religious resurgence on the demand side of politics in western societies than of a new identity cleavage. On the supply side it has analysed the nature of right-wing populists' identity politics to capitalise on this new divide, and focused on their uses of religion as a secularised ethno-national identity marker.

Overall, the analysis has yielded three conclusions that invite further empirical testing: First, that traditional social cleavages appear insufficient to account for the surge of right-wing populism and its use of religion. Second, that the rise of the populist Right is better

understood in the context of the emergence of a new identity cleavage that is redefining politics in western society. Third, that those right-wing populists primarily employ Christian symbols, language, and rituals politically, as an identity marker primarily directed against Islam and immigration, whilst remaining distanced from Christian values, doctrine, and beliefs. Such findings are of some relevance for the current debates on religion, secularisation, and the rise of right-wing populism. Specifically, they show that rather than being driven by a resurgence of conservative religiosity as often assumed in the literature, the New Right is much more secular in nature and may be – through its culturalised use of Christian symbols – not just a symptom but also a harbinger of secularisation. This hypothesis appears to be supported by the empirical observation that in Western Europe right-wing populists' identitarian promotion of religious symbols is often most popular amongst irreligious voters or non-practicing 'cultural Christians' whereas practicing Christians remain comparatively 'immune' to such attempts. Similarly, many Christian leaders in the West have been quite outspoken in their public opposition to the populist Right. By contrast, disproportionate white evangelical support for Donald Trump invites further research as to how to explain such strong variations between Christian reactions to right-wing populist politics across countries. While there is a growing body of literature exploring factors such as the role of church leaders, social taboos, the availability of electoral alternatives, and the role of the institutional arrangement of church-state relations in accounting for this variation, much more research will be necessary as the populist tide breaks across the West and as new debates emerge about the future of Christianity, its symbols, and institutions, in the new identity politics of the Right.

Notes

1. The elite interviews for this study were conducted in person from 2019–2020 in a semi-structured fashion. For a sample questionnaire see Annexe A. All interviewees were fully informed about the research project and provided written and/or verbal consent to the use of the material. Ethical Approval for this procedure was sought from the Cambridge University Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) Research Committee and has been granted in February 2019. For a more detailed analysis of the interview material see also Cremer (2021d).
2. The Front National (FN) changed its name to the RN in 2018. Both abbreviations (FN and RN) are used in this contribution depending on the time period being considered.
3. The 'Manif Pour Tous' is the political organisation which organised the large demonstrations and actions in opposition to the introduction of gay marriage in 2012. Though officially apolitical and non-denominational, it is usually considered to be primarily linked to conservative Catholic circles in France (Du Cleuziou 2019).
4. Such classifications have historically been less prominent in the United States, where there has been a strong tradition of attributing to any form of religious identity an 'important role in the process of immigrant incorporation' (Casanova 2012, 493; Kaufmann 2018). However, since 9/11, and in particular since the rise of Trump, Islamophobia has become an ever more important tenet in American populism.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A. Sample questionnaire (religious leaders)

Part 1: Background

1. Could you briefly describe your position within your organisation and how in the context of your responsibilities you are confronted with the topic of right-wing populism?

Part 2: Religion and politics in your country

2. What does 'Christian identity' mean to you? How would you define it?
3. Do you think that Christianity is or should be part of your country's culture and national identity? Could you explain how this relationship manifests itself in practice? What about you other religions such as Judaism and Islam?
4. How would you assess the role of religion in your country's politics? Has religion become more or less important in politics in recent years? Is this a positive or a negative development in your view?
5. What is your view on the current institutional settlement of church-state relations in your country? Is it applied in appropriate ways, given today's social and political circumstances?

Part 3: Christianity and national populism in your country

6. National populist movements often reference your country's Judeo-Christian heritage and identity in their rhetoric. How do you feel about such references? Are they a positive or a negative development? Why?
7. Many of your colleagues – and possibly yourself – are driven by their Christian faith in their professional lives. Many national populist politicians claim this, too. Can you understand their argumentation and is the common reference to faith potential for 'common ground'?
8. Why do you think that national populist movements are making references to Christianity now when this was not necessarily the case with earlier right-wing populist parties?

Part 4: The relationship between national populism and the institutional church(es) in your country

9. National populists often present themselves as an electoral alternative for Christians, who feel no longer represented by the mainstream parties or the institutional church. Can you understand it when Christian voters turn towards national populist movements for religious reasons?
10. In recent years, many high-ranking church representatives and faith leaders have publicly criticised national populist movements and their references to religion. How do feel about this? When and why do you think that such interventions are legitimate and where do you see the limits of such a confrontation?
11. Is there much debate within your organisation/church about how to approach the question of national populism? Is the course of the church's leadership contested?
12. In your personal experience with various groups/factions/levels of authority within your organisation/church do you see any differences in their attitudes towards national populist movements? Which segments are the most critical, which the most accommodating? Why?

Part 5: Looking ahead

13. Do you think that religion will become more or less important in your country's politics going forward? Do you think this is a positive or a negative development?
14. Do you think that relations between national populist movements and the institutional churches have recently improved or deteriorated in your country? Do you think this trend will continue? Why?
15. What question have I forgotten? Is there anything else you think I should have asked or that you would like to share with me?
16. Whom else do you think I should talk to about this question either within your organisation or beyond?