



Religion and the Radical Right in West European Democracies: Christian and Para-Christian Identities

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Abstract

Much focus has been placed on how radical right parties appropriate religion, especially Christianity, to advance political aims. However, this overlooks cases where religion is not merely appropriated by radical right parties. This paper seeks to address that gap and look at the relationship between radical right movements and religion and argues for a broader comparative view of the merger between religion and radical right politics. Using supply and demand side perspectives, I show how radical right parties in different countries have integrated Christian identity into their agendas in different ways. I further argue that the decline of Christian Democratic parties and broader secularization trends have enabled this shift as radical right parties fill the ideological void with a culturally defined Christianity that resonates with voters disoriented by rapid societal change.

Keywords: Radical Right Parties, Christianity, Party politics, Immigration, Secularization, Culture, Religion

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DOI: 10.53483/ZCPZ3593

When studying the role of religion in radical right politics, the overall impression is that of an increasing appropriation of religion by the radical right. Cas Mudde, for example, posited a few years ago that “[T]he new fight against ‘global Islam’ has led to a new emphasis, and in some cases even new appreciation, of Christianity.”¹ Such a view, however, overlooks that in some countries or regions of the democratic world, religion is not simply appropriated, and Islam is not the prime target. Rather, religion acts as a genuine driver of the ongoing merger between religion and radical right politics. Therefore, a broader comparative view is necessary to address the levels and processes of such appropriation, along with the identification of a more genuine religious input. This essay highlights a few key aspects of the relationship between religion, in particular Christianity, and the narratives and electoral dynamics of the radical right in Western democracies from a supply and demand perspective.

Religion on the Radical Right Agenda: Conceptual Preliminaries

Most common definitions of the radical right do not include religion. Instead, ethnicity, racism and/or rejection of immigration usually form the core of the definitions.² Right-wing radicalism is defined here in a broader sense—as an attempt to halt or even reverse the modernization and liberalization of developed industrial societies through the radicalization of inclusive and exclusive criteria of belonging and to fight the perceived carriers of modernization and liberalization as enemies of the nation in the Schmittian sense.³ It is thus a political ideology that revolves around the myth of a homogeneous nation, a romantic ultranationalism that rejects liberal, pluralistic democracy with its fundamental principles of individualism and universalism. Religion can enter not only as an out-group but also as an in-group marker. At the same time, it is important to distinguish an extreme, clearly antidemocratic right from a nativist or culturalist right that rejects particular out-groups as not belonging to the nation while only implicitly challenging the democratic order and rules of the game. Populism figures not as a distinct ideology but rather as a political style or strategy opposing institutions and representatives of pluralist parliamentary democracy.⁴

This approach begs the question: What kind of religion is at play? And how is it defined and measured? To begin with, the “appreciation” of Christianity by the radical right should not be confused with a return to the Christian faith (e.g., a rise in churchgoing and church membership); it is an aspect of culturalization of religion. In this view, I follow Olivier Roy, who argues “[F]undamentally, religion only asserts itself as a religion when it explicitly dissociates itself from culture, even if it is in a fragile, momentary and, ultimately, abstract effort.”⁵ If this dissociation does not take place and culture is not postulated as the Other, religion coagulates into a local

1 Mudde, Cas. “Conclusion: studying populist radical right parties and politics in the twenty-first century,” in idem (ed.), *The populist radical right: a reader, Routledge studies in extremism and democracy*. (London: Routledge, 2017). p. 610.

2 Betz, Hans-Georg. *Radical right-wing Populism in Western Europe*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994); Mudde, Cas. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Pirro, Andrea L. P. “Far Right: The Significance of an Umbrella Concept.” *Nations and Nationalism* 29, no. 1 (2023): 101–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12860>.

3 Minkenberg, Michael. “The Renewal of the Radical Right: Between Modernity and Anti-Modernity.” *Government and Opposition* 35, no. 2 (2000): 170–88. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1477-7053.00022>; Carter, Elisabeth. *The Extreme Right in Western Europe: Success or Failure?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Bar-On, Tamir. “The Radical Right and Nationalism,” in Jens Rydgren (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 17–41.

4 Moffit, Benjamin. *The Global Rise of Populism. Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2016).

5 Roy, Olivier. *Holy Ignorance. When Religion and Culture Part Ways*. (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2010), p. 28.

(particular) culture and loses its potency as universal. Against this backdrop, the radical right's use of Christianity as an identity marker for their own nation or Europe as a whole may represent an elementary culturalization of religion. More specifically, its use of Christian symbols as a marker against perceived or real threats cannot be deduced from or reduced to its hostility to Islam. It also includes references to a Christian heritage (directed against immigrants and feminists/LGBT+ individuals, the secular Left) and to a Christian Europe (against "godless" Brussels/the EU and globalization). In sum, this is a culture war that proceeds in a populist fashion and promotes illiberal values in combination with an ultranationalist agenda.⁶ This is new in Western Europe (compared to pre-2000) and seemingly successful.

It is successful because this argumentation occurs in the context of a peculiar secularity: In contrast to a supposedly backward Islam, Christianity would be so modern that it would even be compatible with secularity.⁷ In this way, Christianity can be transformed into a culture, while Islam is seen as inherently religious, backward, and illiberal. At the same time, such a take on Christianity turns into a para-Christian identity, because its protagonists do not seek to Christianize their respective societies, as Christian Democrats did in the 1950s. Instead, they articulate a fundamentally rather "un-Christian," i.e., xenophobic, attitude, which uses Christian semantics for reasons of political expediency and can be described as "para-Christian," in reference to earlier works on the Weimar Republic (where Christian semantics were fused with ethnocentric, or *völkisch*, and neo-pagan elements in the transition from the Weimar to the Nazi regime).⁸

Supply Side: The 'Return of Religion' and the West European Radical Right

After World War II, Western democracies went through several waves of radical right-wing mobilization (see Table 1), mostly in the form of a national opposition that was directed against the democratic political order in general and aspects of democratization in particular.⁹ During the 1970s, a strategic and programmatic renewal took place on the far right. First, the intellectual movement of the New Right aimed at creating a counter-discourse to the despised "ideas of 1968." This involved the proclamation of an ethnocentric culture war with the aim of filling the public debate with right-wing content promoting homogeneous nation, a strong state and discrimination against everything "foreign." The most important ideological innovation was the New Right's concept of "ethnopluralism," which differentiated their thinking from old-fashioned notions of biological racism and white supremacy. In a direct appropriation of the left-wing concept of the "right to difference," the New Right emphasized the incompatibility of cultures and ethnicities and advocated the right of Europeans to maintain their particularities as a difference to other cultures. These other cultures originally included Christianity, which the New Right saw as

6 Hennig, Anja, and Mirjam Weiberg-Salzmann (eds.). *Religion and Illiberal Politics. Concepts, Actors, and Identity Narratives in Europe and Beyond*. (Frankfurt (Main)/New York: Campus, 2021).

7 Brubaker, Rogers. "Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 8 (2017): 1191-1226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1294700>; Ryan, Ben. "Christianism," in Jeffrey Haynes (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Politics and Ideology*. (London: Routledge, 2022). 211-226.

8 Cancik, Hubert. "'Neuheidentum' und totaler Staat. Völkische Religion am Ende der Weimarer Republik," in idem (ed.), *Religions- und Geistesgeschichte der Weimarer Republik*. (Düsseldorf: Patmos Verlag, 1982). p. 176-212.

9 von Beyme, Klaus. "Right-wing Extremism in Post-war Europe." *West European Politics* 11, no. 2 (1988): 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402388808424678>; Minkenberg, Michael. "The Renewal of the Radical Right: Between Modernity and Anti-Modernity." *Government and Opposition* 35, no. 2 (2000): 170-88. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1477-7053.00022>; Mudde, Cas. *The Far Right Today*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

a religion alien to Europe, an “import” from the Middle East in late antiquity. Over time, however, the argumentation has inverted so that today’s radical right claims to preserve the cultural (read: Christian) identity of the nation and/or continent and reject cultural mixing—a religiously charged counter-model to concepts of multiculturalism.¹⁰

Contrary to earlier waves, the new or reformed radical right parties in Western Europe were not just a wave; they were there to stay, as underlined by Table 1. Almost all these parties cultivated a strongly ethnocentric platform, instead of a traditional biologically racist one, with little room for religion. However, links have existed for some time between some radical right-wing parties and ultraconservative or fundamentalist currents of Christianity.

These include Le Pen’s Front National in alliance with the anti-liberal Lefebvrists, the Austrian FPÖ and BZÖ, the Swiss SVP, and the Italian Lega Nord, which have increasingly attacked Islam.¹¹ In Denmark, Protestant fundamentalists sided with the Danish People’s Party, and the differences between parts of the Christian party and the DF are becoming increasingly blurred.¹² This trend has recently been reinforced by the German radical right. In the 1990s, the “Republicans” were known for their xenophobia in general than their Islamophobia. The new Alternative for Germany, which originally established itself as a radical anti-EU party in 2013, has since moved further to the right. It is increasingly mobilizing against immigrants, refugees, and Islam, as well as the Left (in particular the Greens) and associated movements (e.g., environmental, feminist, LGBT+). Its various suborganizations include a Protestant pietist group, the “Christians in the AfD,” similar to the Lefebvrists in the Front National.¹³

These connections have been accentuated by a recent shift in discourse with the emergence of so-called “pro-life” groups among Evangelical and Catholic Christians, who have taken up the fight against liberal abortion rules and LGBT+ communities, in favor of the traditional family, and who cooperate or even merge with radical right-wing parties.¹⁴ There are also key players in the right-wing milieu who actively practice a Christian faith. However, these forms of new-right Christianity are rather marginal in Western Europe, in contrast to Christian nationalism in the United States.

10 Camus, Jean-Yves. “The European Extreme Right and Religious Extremism.” In *Varieties of Right-Wing Extremism in Europe*. Andrea Mammoné, Emmanuel Godin and Brian Jenkins (eds) (London: Routledge, 2013); Bar-On, Tamir. *Rethinking the French New Right: Alternatives to Modernity*. (London: Routledge, 2013).

11 Minkenberg, Michael. “Religion and the Radical Right”, in Jens Rydgren (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). 366-393.

12 Lövhelm, Mia. “Religion on the Political Agenda, in Inger Furseth,” in *Religious Complexity in the Public Sphere. Comparing Nordic Countries*. (New York: Palgrave, 2018).

13 Thielmann, Wolfgang (ed.). *Alternative Christen. Die AfD und ihr gespaltenes Verhältnis zur Religion*. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2017).

14 Spierings, Niels. “Why Gender and Sexuality are both Trivial and Pivotal in Populist Radical Right Politics,” in Gabriele Dietze and Julia Roth (eds.), *Right-Wing Populism and Gender: European Perspectives and Beyond*. (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2020). 41-58.

Table 1: Radical right parties' election results (in %) for national parliamentary elections 1945–2019
(average in five-year intervals) in selected West European countries

	1945- 1949	1950- 1954	1955- 1959	1960- 1964	1965- 1969	1970- 1974	1975- 1979	1980- 1984	1985- 1989	1990- 1994	1995- 1999	2000- 2004	2005- 2009	2010- 2014	2015- 2019
Austria (AT)	11.7	11.0	7.1	7.1	5.4	5.5	5.7	5.0	9.7	19.6	24.4	10.0	28.3	24.0	26.0
Belgium (Be)	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	2.3	1.1	1.7	6.6	10.9	13.8	14.0	5.8	10.0
Denmark (DK)	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	[15.9]	[13.1]	6.4	6.9	6.4	9.8	12.6	13.9	12.3	21.1
France (FR)	0.6	2.0	8.2	0.9	0.5	-	-	0.4	9.9	12.7	14.9	12.4	4.7	13.6	13.2
Germany (DE)	1.8	1.1	1.0	0.8	3.2	0.6	-	0.2	0.6	2.3	3.3	1.0	2.1	1.7	13.0
Great Britain (GB)	-	-	-	-	-	0.3	0.4	-	0.6	0.9	-	0.2	0.7	1.8	2.7
Italy (IT)	2.0	5.8	4.8	5.1	4.5	8.7	5.7	6.8	5.9	18.0	25.8	4.3*	8.3*	4.1*	17.3
Netherlands (NL)	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	0.8	0.7	2.9	0.6	11.4	5.9	12.7	13.1
Norway (NO)	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	5.0	1.9	4.5	8.4	6.0	15.3	14.7	22.5	16.3	15.2
Sweden (SV)	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	-	-	4.0	-	1.5	3.0	9.3	17.5
Switzerland (CH)	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	3.8	6.3	11.9	18.7	26.6	30.0	26.6	29.4

Notes: Red is double-digit results; Green is government participation at the national level (direct or indirect); Parties included: Austria: VdU/WdU, FPÖ, BZÖ; Belgium: UDRT, VLB, VB, Front national; Denmark: FrP, DF; France: Poujade, FN, MNR; Germany: DRP, NPD Republikaner, DVU, Pro Deutschland; Great Britain: BNP, NF, Democratic Unionist Party; Italy: MSI, AN, MS-FT, LN; Netherlands: Center Party, CD, LPF List Pim Fortuyn, PVV; Norway: FrP; Sweden: Ny Demokrati, Sverigedemokraterna, Nationaledemokraterna; Switzerland: SVP, Autopartei, Schweizer Demokraten, Lega dei Ticinesi; Parties in [brackets] are not entirely radical right (primarily anti-tax parties).¹

* AN excluded

¹ Minkenberg, Michael, "The Radical Right and Anti-Immigrant Politics in Liberal Democracies since World War II: Evolution of a Political and Research Field," *Polity* 53, no. 3 (2021): p. 399f. https://doi.org/10.1086/7141670open_in_new.

In terms of the proliferation of a religious agenda, there are three main types of radical right parties, as depicted in Table 2: a largely nonreligious radical right, a fundamentally religious radical right, and a radical right that has incorporated religion into its repertoire over the course of its existence. For all successful, long-time radical right parties, such as those in France, Belgium, Austria, and Denmark, an increasing appropriation of a Christian identity can be detected—typically but not exclusively as a defense against immigration from Muslim countries. There are only a few cases where the radical right has had a religious agenda from the beginning: These can be found mostly in less secular contexts and/or more recently established party formations, like in Italy, Spain, and Portugal. Italy is a particular case with the Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, two major parties on the far right. Whereas the former represents the typical ethnocentrist case that merely added an anti-Muslim element to the program, Fratelli has appropriated certain elements of the defunct Christian Democrats and their successors. Newcomers Vox and Chega also have cultivated a Christian nationalist agenda since their founding.¹⁵

In sum, the concept of “ethnopluralism,” which stemmed from the intellectual and anti-Christian New Right movement of the 1970s, has traveled across the decades, ending up in the party platforms of almost all contemporary radical right parties in Western Europe (and beyond), with an affirmation of Europe’s and the respective countries’ Christian identity. That is, today a religiously—usually Christian and anti-Muslim—tinged ethnopluralism serves as a master frame to mobilize support for the radical right in the streets and at the ballot box.

But as argued above, these are aspects of a para-Christian identity rather than a Christian revival, focusing on Islam and the cultural threat from outside (e.g., immigration, the EU, globalization) and inside (e.g., feminism, the Left, LGBT+ communities). In addition, in some countries, like France, Denmark, and Germany, there is a marriage of anti-liberal Christian fundamentalism (both Protestant and Catholic) with the radical right.¹⁶

15 See various contributions to Hennig, Anja, and Mirjam Weiberg-Salzmann (eds.). *Religion and Illiberal Politics. Concepts, Actors, and Identity Narratives in Europe and Beyond*. (Frankfurt (Main)/New York: Campus, 2021).

16 Doeblér, Stefanie. “Love Thy Neighbor? Relationships between Religion and Racial Intolerance in Europe.” *Politics and Religion* 8, no. 4 (2015): 745–771. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048315000607>.

Table 2: The radical right and its religious agenda in Western Europe and beyond (since 1990s)

	Party	Movement
No explicit religious reference/agenda from start	NPD/DVU, Republikaner (DE) NA/NNP/NVU, CD (NL) MSI/AN (pre '95) (IT) MSFT (IT) BNP (GB) La Libertad Avanza (AR)	ANS/FAP, NPD (DE) Dansk Front (DK) FANE (FR) ANS/JSN (NL)
Explicit religious reference/agenda as addition to ethnocentrist platform	AfD (DE) Vlaams Blok/Belang (BE) FN/RN (FR) DF (DK) Lega Nord (IT) FPÖ, BZÖ (AT) SVP (CH) [Republicans (US)]	English Defence League (UK) Tea Party (US)
Explicit religious reference/agenda as core of platform from start	List Pim Fortuyn, PpV (NL) Fratelli (IT) Vox (ES) Chega (PT) Constitution Party (US) Social Christian Party (BR) Partido Republicano (CL)	PEGIDA (DE) CCS (FR) New Era (DK) Arhus against the Mosque (DK) The Identitarians (EU) Christian Identity (US) Christian Right (parts) (US) Bolsonarism (BR) Traditionalists (AR)

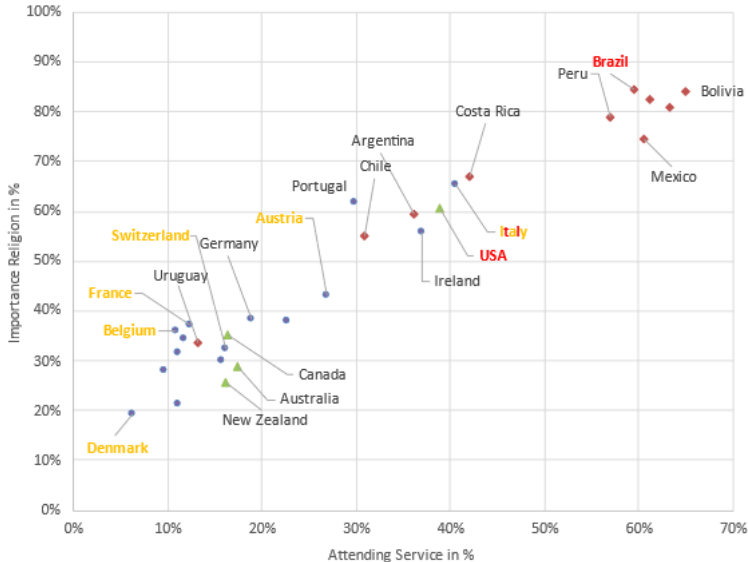
Notes: **Bold** is parties with **sustained electoral relevance and/or government participation**; the US Republicans are placed in [square brackets] as they are not to be classified as a radical right-wing party in their entirety.¹⁷

17 Zúquete, José Pedro. "The European extreme-right and Islam: New directions?" *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 3 (2008): 321-344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310802377019>; Minkenberg, Michael. "Religion and the Radical Right," 366-393 (updated); Camus, Jean-Yves. "The European Extreme Right and Religious Extremism." In *Varieties of Right-Wing Extremism in Europe*. Andrea Mammone, Emmanuel Godin and Brian Jenkins (eds) (London: Routledge, 2013); Bar-On, Tamir. *Rethinking the French New Right: Alternatives to Modernity*. (London: Routledge, 2013).

Demand Side: Secularization, Pluralization, and Party System Change

As a first step in identifying religiously minted drivers of radical right mobilization, a closer and more comparative look at the degree of secularization is helpful, with secularization being understood in conventional terms as a decline in attachment to religious institutions and practices.¹⁸

Figure 1: Religiosity in Western democracy on both sides of the Atlantic (2017–2022)



Notes: Blue dots are West European countries; Green triangles are non-European Anglo democracies; orange diamonds are Central and Latin American countries; Countries in red have an established radical right with a religious agenda from the beginning; Countries in orange have an established radical right with a religious agenda on top of ethnocentrism; Italy is a mixed case with the older ethnocentrist Lega and the newer ultra-Catholic Fratelli.

Sources: Costa Rica <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america/>; Belgium and Ireland: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/religious-practice-and-belief/>; Rest: World Values Survey Wave 7: 2017–2022.

In line with Norris and Inglehart, a transatlantic comparison can help specify the significance of various textual and contextual factors. Concerning the topic at hand, the following thesis can be put forward: “In more secularized societies, relevant radical right parties with a religious agenda exhibit primarily para-Christian narratives, while in less secularized societies, a marriage between illiberal Christianity/fundamentalism and the radical right predominates.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Bruce, Steve. *God is Dead. Secularisation in the West*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

¹⁹ Norris, Pippa, and Ronald Inglehart. *Sacred and Secular. Religion and Politics Worldwide*. 2nd rev. edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

A quick look at the simple secularization scale in Figure 1 makes clear that in the Western world, the United States appears with Latin America (except for Uruguay) on one end and West European countries (except for Ireland and Italy) on the other end. In consequence of this contextual view, the appropriation of religion by the radical right ought to account for the different levels of secularization. In a largely secularized context, parties do not gain many votes with a genuinely Christian message, as underlined by the small Christian parties in Nordic Europe.²⁰ Christian narratives on the radical right agenda prevail in cases with lower levels of secularization (e.g., the United States and Brazil), while para-Christian identities on the far right are dominant in rather secularized Western Europe.

Table 3: Religiosity (frequency of church going) and the radical right vote
(% of respondents), 2014

	France		Austria		Denmark		Germany	
	FN voters	(all)	FPÖ voters	(all)	DF voters	(all)	AfD voters	(all)
Several times a week	2	(2)	--	(2)	--	(1)	1	(1)
Weekly	3	(6)	8	(12)	2	(2)	4	(6)
Monthly	3	(6)	11	(16)	9	(9)	2	(11)
Rarely	35	(37)	53	(48)	62	(54)	23	(42)
Never	57	(49)	28	(22)	27	(34)	70	(40)
N	126	(1059)	153	(1093)	143	(1178)	69	(2082)

Data: European Social Survey (seventh wave between Sep. 2014 and Jan. 2015),
own calculations.

Recall question: "Which party did you vote for in the last national elections?"²¹

Moreover, as the snapshot in Table 3 reveals, electoral research provides little evidence of a relevant number of new-right Christians on the demand side in the electorate of radical right-wing parties or that religiosity plays a significant role in explaining the far right vote.²² Further studies on West European electorates corroborate the finding that religiously active people are less likely to vote for radical right parties because these voters are attached to Christian Democratic or otherwise religiously articulated conservative parties. However, as the findings for Belgium, Norway, and Switzerland show, more orthodox believers diverge from the mainstream voters in that the former feel more threatened by immigration, have lost confidence in the CD parties, and hence are more likely to vote for the radical right.²³

20 Lövheim, Mia. "Religion on the Political Agenda, in Inger Furseth," in *Religious Complexity in the Public Sphere. Comparing Nordic Countries*. (New York: Palgrave, 2018)

21 Minkenberg, Michael. "Religion and the Radical Right." Table 19.3, p. 380.

22 Arzheimer, Kai, and Elisabeth Carter. "Christian Religiosity and Voting for West European Radical Right Parties." *West European Politics* 32, no. 1 (2009): 985-1011; Minkenberg, Michael. "Religion and the Radical Right." 366-393.

23 Immerzeel, Tim, Eva Jaspers, and Marcel Lubbers. "Religion as Catalyst or Restraint of Radical Right Voting?" *West European Politics* 36, no. 5 (2013): 946-968. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2013.797235>; Siegers, Pascal, and Alexander Jedinger. "Religious Immunity to Populism: Christian Religiosity and Public Support for the Alternative for Germany." *German Politics* 30, no. 2 (2020): 149-169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2020.1723002>.

In sum, in the West European context, it is important to consider the particularities of culturalized Christian references. On the far right, a romanticized vision of a Christian nation and/or a Christian Europe emerges, here understood as a para-Christian identity that mixes ethnocentrist views with religious belonging and functions as an anti-liberal hinge between racist sentiments and pro-life stances—not unlike the logic of “Make America Great (and Christian) Again.”

Table 4: Religious diversity and pluralization trends (1980–2000) and strength of radical right parties in Western democracies

	<i>Weak pluralization</i> ($d < 0.10$)	<i>Moderate pluralization</i> ($0.10-0.20$)	<i>Strong pluralization</i> ($d > 0.20$)
<i>Low diversity</i> (< 0.20)	Ireland Portugal (Sweden: d =negative)	BELGIUM DENMARK NORWAY Finland	FRANCE ITALY AUSTRIA Spain
<i>Moderate diversity</i> ($0.20-0.50$)			
<i>High diversity</i> (> 0.50)	SWITZERLAND Australia Canada New Zealand (USA: d =negative)	Germany Great Britain Netherlands	

Notes: The base of categorization is the diversity value of 1980 (0: completely homogeneous, 1.00: completely diverse); d = difference of diversity value between 1980 and 2000; In countries in bold, Muslims are the second largest religious community; Countries in CAPITAL LETTERS are those with a strong radical right-wing or xenophobic party in the country’s party system (at least 4% in every national parliamentary election since 1990); The two periods are not synchronized because such processes do not translate into political changes immediately.²⁴

To account for the growing appropriation of religion by radical right actors, it is helpful to look beyond secularization and at pluralization processes as well. Here, the argument is that in countries with a largely denominational (Catholic or Protestant) homogeneity until the 1980s and subsequent rapid pluralization due to immigration and demographic changes, the radical right finds fertile ground among those who resent these changes and long for a restoration of previous, Christian predominance. But what matters is not the *share* of Muslims or immigrants but the *pace* of change in the transition from the late 20th to the early 21st century.²⁵ This is illustrated in Table 4: It is precisely those countries that were religiously homogenous until the

24 Minkenberg, Michael. “Religion and the Radical Right.” Table 19.7, p. 386.

25 Mudde, Cas. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

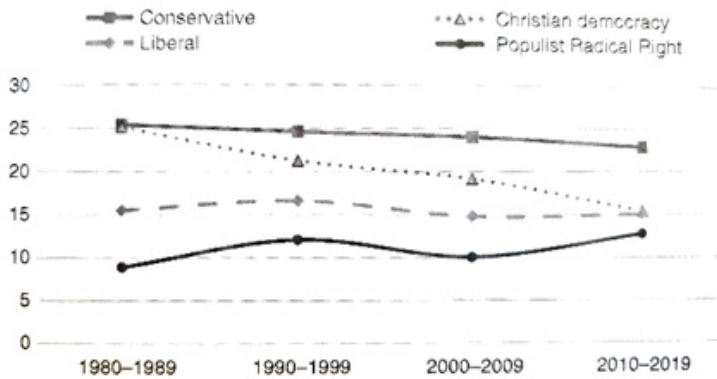
1980s before undergoing rapid pluralization where radical right parties have risen and become competitive in the party systems.²⁶

This points to changing patterns of party competition as a crucial factor. In their seminal article on the issue, Arzheimer and Carter conclude:

[R]eligiosity continues to be an important predictor of electoral choice. Yet, this “vaccine effect” is likely to become weaker with time due to general de-alignment trends induced by social modernization and value change [...] Christian Democratic and conservative parties are today faced with fewer religious voters than they once were. Thus, in spite of still being able to “encapsulate” religious voters, this natural reservoir of support is shrinking. All other things being equal, therefore, this points to an increase in the potential of radical right parties.²⁷

In other words, the decline of major center-right parties, especially those close to mainline churches, or their transformation, feeds into the adoption of para-Christian narratives by radical right parties and thereby enhances the resonance of radical right parties. The trendlines in Figure 2 suggest a direct relationship between the electoral decline of CD parties in Western Europe and the rise of the radical right.

Figure 2: Electoral results in national elections of right-wing parties in Western Europe (average per decade in %)²⁸



This impression is corroborated by my own research on the link between the fate of these two party families: In countries where Christian Democrats have significantly lost their electoral standing over the past three decades, the radical right has been able to establish itself as a permanent and electorally significant force.²⁹ These countries include CD-core countries like Austria, Belgium, Italy, and Switzerland, along with

²⁶ Minkenberg, Michael. “Religion and the Radical Right”; Minkenberg, Michael. *Religion und Politik in westlichen Demokratien*. (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2024).

²⁷ Arzheimer, Kai, and Elisabeth Carter. “Christian Religiosity and Voting for West European Radical Right Parties.” p. 1005.

²⁸ Bale, Tim, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. “The Mainstream Right in Western Europe: Caught between the Silent Revolution and Silent Counter-Revolution,” in idem (eds.), *Riding the Populist Wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis*. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2021). 1-37, here p. 3.

²⁹ Minkenberg, Michael. *Religion und Politik in westlichen Demokratien*. Table 7.8, p. 255.

radical right late-comer CD-core countries like Germany and the Netherlands, as well as non-CD countries like Denmark, France, and Norway. In each one, the radical right has an explicit religious (pro-Christian, anti-Islam) message (see Table 2 above). This scenario can be attributed in part to the dilemma in which Christian Democrats found themselves as values changed and post-materialism arose: The more they tried to tone down their traditional Christian message and accommodate new (post-materialist) cohorts of voters, the further they moved away from their traditional base.³⁰ Yet there is more at work here. Secularization happens independent of the shift toward more post-material values and erodes the classic electoral foundation of Christian Democratic parties. On top of that, cultural and religious pluralization challenges this party family more than any other. In this context, Christian narratives move out of their traditional home in the party system, finding a new though not necessarily more religious one with the radical right.³¹

Conclusion

Today, the appropriation of religion by the radical right and other political actors is a defense mechanism against alleged or real threats to an idealized way of life, rapid societal change and growing ethnic, cultural, religious, and life-style diversity. This harks back to a rather classic theme in radical right research, that the radical right prospers not simply owing to economic stress but also due to accelerated cultural change, because it promises a return to simpler times. Its formula is to romanticize the times before the stress started and promise a return to a homogenous national community.³² Clearly, this promise is a test for liberal democracy.

In the West European context, Christianity is undergoing a politically distorted reassessment by radical right actors, who instrumentalize the religion for political purposes while detaching themselves from its traditional beliefs and practices. This differs from the American context, both in North America and in South America. The extent of the detachment in West Europe remains to be seen. More generally, in the age of secularization, cultural pluralization, and globalization, even political actors who long thought they could do without Christianity are turning to the religion—in a “para-Christian” sense. This marks the return of a particular faith, namely an extreme “faith” in the nation, a quasi-religious identity that offers a sense of political belonging to those who feel lost in an increasingly complex world.

30 Inglehart, Ronald. *Modernization and Postmodernization*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Bale, Tim, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. “The Mainstream Right in Western Europe: Caught between the Silent Revolution and Silent Counter-Revolution”

31 Minkenberg, Michael. *Religion und Politik in westlichen Demokratien*. 253-256.

32 Scheuch, Erwin, and Hans-Dieter Klingemann. “Theorie des Rechtsradikalismus in westlichen Industriegesellschaften. *Hamburger Jahrbuch für Wirtschafts- und Gesellschaftspolitik*” 12 (1967): 11-29.