Catholicism and pan-European identity from Schuman to Orbán

Mark Cauchi
La Trobe University
Mark.Cauchi@latrobe.edu.au

Abstract
The aim of this article is to examine the role of Catholic political thought in relation to the history of European integration and show how the shift away from this communitarian tradition by mainstream social democratic and conservative parties can help explain the rise of populism. The idea of Europe as a unified entity has always been grounded in its Christian character, and this was the basis of the Christian Democratic pan-European project of the EU's 'founding fathers' in the mid-twentieth century. The rise of both social and economic liberalism in the ensuing years led to a disconnect between the political establishment – who remain largely supportive of the project – and growing numbers of disaffected citizens. A refocusing of the political narrative in relation to European integration on the continent's communitarian and Christian (and Social) Democratic traditions could halt the advance of populist-nationalism and Eurosceptic parties.

Keywords: Christian Democracy, European integration, European Union, populism

Introduction

The rise of populism in Western Europe, and the election of nationalist governments in several former communist states in Eastern Europe, has brought into question the viability of the European project of an 'ever-closer union', and the liberal worldview it has come to represent. In nation-states such as France, Italy, Austria, Poland and Hungary, as well as some regions of Germany, populist parties have succeeded in either forming government, or have come very close to doing so. Cas Mudde interprets anti-European Union sentiment as part of a broader anti-establishment 'populism' of the *volonté générale* of the people versus a corrupt elite, with opposition to the social and economic liberalism – especially large-scale immigration – of the EU at its core. For Paul Taggart, the 'democratic deficit' of the EU is an ongoing problem.[1] The challenge posed by populist parties throughout the EU and 'Brexit' in the United Kingdom has forced governments, scholars and observers to take seriously the possibility that support for liberal policies and further European integration is fragile.

Since its establishment, the EU has realised some of the ideals of early, conservative, Christian Democrats such as Robert Schuman, who believed that unity and cooperation, especially between Germany and France, would finally secure peace in Europe.[2] However, the liberal nature of the EU's economic and social policy, as well as its commitment to freedom of movement both for citizens of nations within the

---

[1] Cas Mudde (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government & Opposition*, 39(4). pp. 543–4; Paul Taggart (2004). Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe. Journal of Political Ideologies. 9(3). pp.269-88
[2] Robert Schuman, 'The Schuman Declaration', May 9, 1950. https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/symbols/europe-day/schuman-declaration_en

Schengen zone and migrants hoping to move to Europe, has given rise to a reaction from many conservative Europeans. The rise in support of populist parties, and the retreat amongst large sections of the European public into old ideas of nationalism, can plausibly be traced to the abandonment by the major parties governing the EU and its member states of the Christian Democratic origins of the European Union in favour of economic liberalism, globalization, and remote technocracy by the major parties governing the EU and its member states. At a time when the project of European integration is in danger of losing momentum amongst sections of the European population due to political divisions and the lack of a unifying narrative, a European identity that incorporates the Christian Democratic origins of the European project could assist with returning the discourse surrounding pan-Europeanism back to its communitarian roots and renew its appeal amongst disillusioned European citizens.

Christian Democracy: A post-war consensus

Arising out of the context of post-war Europe was a consensus on the centre-right of politics: a new version of Christian Democracy, incorporating elements of social democracy, Christian social thought, and a commitment to democratic norms and institutions. The broad set of principles and policies that constituted Christian Democracy has its origins in Catholic thought (specifically Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* of 1891) and the formulation of a 'social contract' based on social conservatism; free markets combined with elements of economic distributism and the welfare state; and opposition to both socialism and extreme nationalism.[3] Christian Democracy was seen, by many on the conservative side of politics, to be the most broadly-appealing and least ideologically-charged position at this time, and, in the case of Germany, the best-placed movement to engage with the past while building new democratic institutions and repairing social relations in the West German state.[4] It is important to note that Christian Democratic parties emerged, at this time, solely in Western Europe. Despite a brief, more permissive window between 1945 and 1949, central-eastern Europe was until 1989-1991 ruled by Soviet-aligned regimes, and religion was severely repressed. As a result, Catholics would emerge from this period with a markedly different understanding of their identity. Christianity would experience the most dramatic decline in Europe throughout most of the east, but in countries such as Poland and Hungary this period created the conditions for a new and highly nationalistic expression of religious identity.[5]

Christian Democrats had several advantages when it came to staking their claim to govern post-war Western Europe states. West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (1949-1963) was known for his opposition to Hitler, and his contempt for the Soviet-backed system in what became East Germany.[6] Christian Democratic parties were also determined to represent the political centre ground, which meant compromise; a position that was appealing to citizens in traumatised post-war Europe, and which encompassed both Catholic and Protestant strands (as distinct from pre-war

---

[3] Leo XIII, Rerum Novarum, Papal Encyclical, May 15, 1981. http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html
[4] Maria D. Mitchell (2012). The Origins of Christian Democracy: Politics and Confession in Modern Germany. University of Michigan Press. p.2
[5] Francesco Molteni (2017). Religious Change Among Cohorts in Eastern Europe: A Longitudinal Analysis of Religious Practice and Belief in Formerly Communist Countries. Religion & Society in Central & Eastern Europe. 10(1). pp.35-53
[6] Paul Gottfried (2018). The Rise and Fall of Christian Democracy. Orbis, 51(4). pp.711-23

manifestations). For instance, the German Christian Democratic Union, founded immediately following the Second World War, in Berlin and the western zones of occupation in 1945, brought together Catholics and Protestants aware of the need to establish a broad-based unity party in order to avoid a return to the fractious state of affairs experienced during the Weimar era. While in the Netherlands, Protestants have dominated the Christian Democratic Party (though there is a significant Catholic population in the country), in Italy, Belgium, and Austria, such parties were formed essentially as Catholic parties; whereas Catholics in France contributed to Christian Democratic thinking, and formed part of Charles de Gaulle's support base, despite no major confessional party as such existing in that country.[7] The idiosyncratic French state, despite its hostility to the Church having any special claim over French identity (especially during the Third Republic), nevertheless saw a Catholic political movement emerge out of the French resistance that was also staunchly anti-communist.[8]

Post-war Christian Democratic ideas were both inherently pan-European and committed to the nation-state as the prime – but not the only – governing authority. The likes of Adenauer, Schuman, and Gasperi were integral to the founding of the European Community but were shaped by, and primarily committed to, their respective nation-states (despite West Germany arguably not qualifying in practice as such a state). The experience of finding a compromise between the Church and the liberal state, and balancing rival ideologies following the war, appears to have made the task of establishing a supranational European body a logical step for Christian Democrats.[9] This spirit of compromise and cooperation was its essence, not least because of the need for Western European states to work effectively together to counter the very real threat posed by the neighboring Soviet Union and developing Eastern bloc, and to avoid internal conflict through carving out an ideologically 'centrist' alternative to the two Cold War great powers.

Looking at mid-century Christian Democracy from the vantage point of today, we can also see how the bringing together of confessional and democratic politics laid the foundations for today's populist views in a political culture dominated by economic and social liberalism, centralisation in Brussels, and an increasingly evident federalist urge amongst European leaders. The nineteenth century notion of the nation being a core element of one's identity was still central to the understanding of democracy at that time. However, post-war Christian Democracy also explicitly linked, for the first time in modern Europe, Catholic identity to mass political parties – and, by extension – to the nation, creating a new Catholic identity, one separated from the Church.[10] From this perspective, it is therefore possible to see how, over the ensuing decades, the embracing of secular and liberal ideology by major parties, including the Christian Democrats, and disillusionment with the EU, could be channelled by populists invoking Catholic identity to sway voters away from Christian Democratic pan-Europeanism and towards nationalism.

---

[7] Stathis N. Kalyvas (2018). The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe. Cornell University Press. pp.1-3
[8] Kay Chadwick (2000). Introduction. In Chadwick, Kay (ed). Catholicism, Politics and Society in Twentieth Century France. Liverpool University Press. pp.1-17
[9] European Union, Alcide de Gasperi: An Inspired Mediator for Democracy and Freedom in Europe. https://europa.eu/european-union/sites/europaeu/files/docs/body/alcide_de_gasperi_en.pdf.
[10] Kalyvas. The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe. pp.222-23

Pan-Europeanism and the origins of a European Union

Perhaps the major development in Western European politics in the immediate post-war era was the envisioning of a pan-European political entity - and the formulation of specific proposals to make such an arrangement a reality - that would bind the states of Europe together. The French diplomat and 'father of Europe' Jean Monnet believed that peace in Europe depended on unification rather than a return to the 'prestige politics' of nationalism.[11] This idea of a voluntary union was not entirely new and had often been expressed in religious or 'civilizational' terms, inspired by European empires of the past. There also existed practical considerations at this time: much of Europe was rebuilding after the war, while countries such as France and the Netherlands were increasingly economically dependent on West Germany. There was a recognition that West Germany (whether united or otherwise), due to its size and power, would always occupy a dominant position in Europe, and the question at the time was how to integrate it after the Nazi era into Europe in a way that would benefit, rather than threaten, the continent.[12] The initial outcome of these efforts was the establishment, by the states of West Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg, of the European Coal and Steel Community with the Treaty of Paris in 1951 and the European Atomic Energy Agency and European Economic Community with the Treaty of Rome in 1957 (the executives of which formed the European Community, formed with the Merger Treaty of 1965). However, the thinking behind the creation of a pan-European entity was much more ambitious.[13]

Despite the nominally economic and defence-related bases for these treaties and organisations, various actors, including Christian Democratic politicians and diplomats, Catholic thinkers, and Church leaders, grounded their understanding of a unified Europe in the continent's religious inheritance and their Christian conception of humanity and the state, and emerged as key contributors to the European project. Indeed, it is impossible to understand the origins of the European project without considering the role of Christian Democracy and the Catholic faith of the EU's founding fathers. Post-war Christian Democrats took inspiration from the German Catholic concept of *Abendland* (or the 'Christian West'): a 'neo-Carolingian' construction that would unite Christian states in Western Europe against both Soviet communism and American materialism.[14] While pragmatism and compromise were understood to be necessary to avoid a reprise of brutal ideological and nationalistic conflict in the post-war era, the vision of the 'founding fathers' was guided by Christian Democratic principles that they believed were at the core of European history, culture, and identity, and which transcended the political and ideological disputes of a particular era. Highly romanticised collective memories of (Western) Europe united under Christian rule – the Roman and Holy Roman empires, for example – and the idea of Christian

---

[11] Jean Monnet (1943, August). Jean Monnet's thoughts on the future. CVCE.eu. https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/jean_monnet_s_thoughts_on_the_future_algiers_5_august_1943-en-b61a8924-57bf-4890-9e4b-73bf4d882549.html.

[12] Jean Monnet (1950, September). Memorandum from Jean Monnet to Robert Schuman drawing attention to France's role in finding a European solution to the German problem. CVCE.eu. https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/memorandum_from_jean_monnet_to_robert_schuman_16_september_1950-en-259c61d1-8fee-488a-bf0d-6e0958e0d222.html; Tony Judt (2010). Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945. Vintage Books. pp.153-60

[13] European Parliament, Merger Treaty, July 1, 1965. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=LEGISSUM:4301863&from=EN

[14] Rosario Forlenza (2017). The Politics of the Abendland: Christian Democracy and the Idea of Europe after the Second World War. Contemporary European History. 26(2). pp.261-86

'universalism' (as opposed to modern nationalism) inspired early twentieth century thinking on European unification.[15]

A key proponent in the formation of a pan-European political entity was the post-war Minister of Foreign Affairs of France, Robert Schuman. His 'Schuman Declaration' of 1950 was modest in its proposals: it was limited to the idea of common authority overseeing the production of coal and steel in France and Germany, as well as other European states wishing to join. Moreover, it did not outline in any detail Schuman's thoughts on how a European union might evolve, or the potential geographic extent of the bloc.[16] However, as Adenauer stated in 1956, the long-term purpose of this economic and trading arrangement - which would become the first step in the creation of the European Community and, ultimately, the European Union - was a politically-unified continent capable of acting as a global power.[17] With the harmonising of relations between France and West Germany his urgent task following the war, Schuman believed peace could be realised in Europe through a 'creative' effort to achieve unification.[18] As Krijtenburg notes, there was symbolic as well as practical significance in the act of two former enemies surrendering their sovereignty over coal and steel, which had been a core part of each nation's war effort, to a supranational body formed for the purposes of securing peace and cooperation.[19]

Along with Schuman and Monnet, notable Christian Democrats involved in the formulation and founding of the European Community include the West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and Italian Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi. De Gasperi was a realist and believed in unity for the purposes of coexistence between the nations of Europe, and to strengthen Italy's place in the transatlantic sphere.[20] Adenauer took a pragmatic approach to governance and began advocating a common European approach to the economy and some industry as early as 1919; an idea that would contribute to Schuman's proposals over thirty years later.[21] For these men, Europe's pressing problems at the time could be solved by conceiving of a pan-Europeanism that was always the continent's destiny.

'Euroscepticism' and populist politics in Western Europe

The dominance of liberalism in contemporary Europe, along with the decline and marginalisation of Christian Democratic and communitarian approaches to policy and the political narrative, has given rise to a distinct form of opposition. In recent years, critics of the EU project and liberal ideology – often those 'left behind' by the globalised, multicultural order – have taken a sceptical attitude towards the EU as a

---

[15] Brent F. Nelson, James L. Guth, John C. Green, Ted Jelen, and Mark Rozell (2015). Religion and the Struggle for European Union: Confessional Culture and the Limits of Integration. Georgetown University Press. pp.35-66

[16] Schuman, Robert, 'The Schuman Declaration'

[17] European Union (1956, September 29). Konrad Adenauer and the European Integration [Press statement]. https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=90b35710-947e-00bf-9779-bbab91844282&groupId=252038

[18] European Union. The Schuman Declaration.

[19] Krijtenburg. Robert Schuman's Commitment to European Unification. p.143

[20] Giulio Venneri (2008). Man of faith and political commitment: Alcide De Gasperi in the history of Europe. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*. 13(1).

[21] European Union, Konrad Adenauer and the European Integration: An exhibition of the Archive for Christian Democratic Policy of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=90b35710-947e-00bf-9779-bbab91844282&groupId=252038

reliable custodian of their respective nation's heritage and culture.[22] This opposition has been able to gain traction due to economic inequality between and within regions and states, large-scale migration, and terrorism, and has come to be referred to – dismissively – as 'populism'; its leaders and supporters claiming they represent the values of 'the people' against elite and/or foreign interests.[23] A manifestation in the European context of the 'global Trumpism' phenomenon, this movement combines elements of nationalism, economic protectionism and a desire to protect the cultural heritage and traditions of Europe with (often reasonable and popular) critiques of the EU and its liberal direction.[24]

Italy is one country that has seen a rise in nativist and anti-EU sentiment, especially since the 2008 financial crisis and the 2015 migrant crisis. Andrea Molle shows how increases in immigration levels causes anxiety about the future demographic composition of the nation, leading to a surge in support for populist-nationalist parties and politicians who denounce multiculturalism and promise to address 'illegal' immigration.[25] Matteo Salvini of Lega Nord (MEP, 2004-18; Deputy Prime Minister of Italy, 2018-19), who regularly attacked Islam and religious diversity, while invoking his country's Catholic symbols and heritage, is the most prominent recent example of this type of politician. In a clear reference to both large-scale immigration and declining birthrates amongst Italians, Salvini uses the language of invasion and replacement to describe the situation in Italy and refers to the eventual disappearance of 'European Christendom'. To many Italian citizens attracted to Salvini's position, religious and national identity are inseparable; thus the existence of a large, foreign religion within the state is seen as an existential threat to the nation.[26] As is common amongst populists throughout much of Europe, Salvini links multiculturalism and high levels of immigration with the European Union and its policy of open borders, tolerance of immigration from outside the EU, and failure to manage boat arrivals in an orderly fashion.[27] Given the existing problems with the EU's structure, questionable democratic credentials, and the perception of it being remote from local and national concerns, populists such as Salvini have successfully channeled concern about immigration and multiculturalism into support for his anti-EU and superficially Catholic agenda.[28]

Similar movements have emerged in Germany and Austria, the latter being the second European country (following Italy) to feature a populist-nationalist party in a governing coalition, and the first in which the contemporary far-right exercised considerable power as a major partner in government. As with Italy, populism in Austria centred on the preservation of national character (including its religion) and the perceived problems associated with immigration and the growth of Islam.[29] In

---

[22] Celine Teney, Onawa Promise Lacewell, & Pieter De Wilde (2014). Winners and losers of globalization in Europe: Attitudes and ideologies. European Political Science Review. 6(4). pp.575-595

[23] Mudde. The Populist Zeitgeist. pp.542-44

[24] Mark Blyth (2016, November). Global Trumpism. Foreign Affairs.
https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-11-15/global-trumpism

[25] Andrea Molle (2019). Religion and Right-Wing Populism in Italy: Using Judeo-Christian Roots to Kill the European Union. Religion, State and Society. 47(1). pp.151-68

[26] Andrea Molle (2019). Religion and Right-Wing Populism in Italy: Using Judeo-Christian Roots to Kill the European Union. Religion, State and Society. 47(1). pp.151-68

[27] Walt, Vivienne (2018, September). "We Want to Change Things from Within": Italy's Matteo Salvini on His Goal to Reshape Europe'. Time. https://time.com/5394207/matteo-salvini-time-interview-transcript-full/

[28] Molle. Religion and right-wing populism in Italy. pp.151-68

[29] Pelinka. Austrian Politics. p.82

recent years, Germany's relatively stable post-war political consensus and aversion to overt nationalism has been challenged by the rise of right-wing populism.[30] Despite being, like the Netherlands, a traditionally-mixed, Catholic and Protestant nation, Germany's post-war Christian Democratic settlement resembled more closely that of the Catholic-majority states of the continent, and this is reflected in the character of its populist movements. The emergence of the Alternative für Deutschland in 2013 – and its solid performance in the 2017 elections (winning 12.6%) – was, according to S. T. Franzmann, the result of the economic and immigration crises that affected, to some degree, all European nations, as well as the shifting of the CDU further to the liberal political centre under Angela Merkel's leadership. [31] Given Germany's history of nationalism and its status as the largest and wealthiest state in the EU, the rise of a newly-created populist-nationalist party sceptical of European integration and liberalism/neoliberalism to become the third largest party in the Bundestag shows that dissatisfaction with the traditional Christian and Social Democratic parties is not a marginal issue but one with the potential to disrupt politics wherever 'populist' concerns are not addressed by the prevailing consensus.

The situation in France is unique and somewhat more complex, given the nation's long-standing policy of official *laïcité*, and historically liberal understanding of its statehood and national character. Over the course of the twentieth century, religious commitment declined significantly, and the Roman Catholic Church in France followed the trend in French politics by shifting noticeably in a more 'left-liberal' direction, with a focus on social activism and solidarity with the developing world.[32] During the same period, France saw large-scale migration, especially from its former north African colonies, which introduced a new dynamic to a country in which secular liberalism appeared to have prevailed over religion, and with a sharp separation drawn between the two spheres. Tension between liberal, French secularism and Islam provided fertile ground for the populist Le Pen family and their party, the National Front (since 2018 the National Rally), to grow its support.[33] The far-right movement associated with anti-Semitism, suspicion of republicanism, and a compromised position on France's role in the Second World War, grew under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen from 1972 to 2011. Since then, his daughter and successor Marine Le Pen has built the National Front/Rally into one of the most popular in France, appealing to a diverse constituency including critics of Islam, secular republicans, Catholics, workers, and rural protectionists with a 'communitarian' populist-nationalism closer to that seen in other European nations.

Poland, Hungary, and the 'Catholic Nation'

Emerging from a very different recent history to the Western Europeans, the former communist states of Central and Eastern Europe joined the EU primarily for economic and security reasons, yet majority support for the liberal project of the EU was short-lived. Governing parties such as Poland's Law and Justice and Hungary's Fidesz openly

---

[30] Charles Lees (2018). The 'Alternative for Germany': The rise of right-wing populism at the heart of Europe. Politics. 38(3). pp.295-310

[31] Simon T. Franzmann (2016). Calling the ghost of populism: The AfD's strategic and tactical agendas until the EP election 2014. German Politics. 25(4). pp.457–479

[32] Michael Kelly (2000). Catholicism and the Left in Twentieth Century France. In Kay Chadwick (ed). Catholicism, Politics and Society in Twentieth Century France. Liverpool University Press. p.142

[33] Dominique Reynié (2016). "Heritage Populism" and France' s National Front. Journal of Democracy. 27(4). pp.47-57

characterise their nations as 'Catholic', and are in the process of consolidating conservative, and often reactionary, policies.[34] The leaders of these parties frequently stress the threat posed to tradition, culture and cohesion by the liberal policies advocated by the EU, to populations that have only relatively recently secured freedom of religion. Two major factors are fundamental to understanding the difference between the post-communist states and the rest of the nations of Europe. The first relates to economic development and the rapid imposition of neoliberal policies such as privatisation in the years following the fall of communism.[35] The second is the social and cultural change that took place following the introduction of liberal democratic laws and institutions and joining the EU, which involved committing to the bloc's socially liberal laws and philosophy, and its open border policies.

The latest phase in Poland's history – its liberation from communist rule in 1989, liberalisation of the economy and society in the 1990s, and membership of the EU from 2004 – has brought about an increase in prosperity along with rapid and, for many, disruptive change. The social liberalism of the EU and understanding of the rule of law amongst EU elites sits uncomfortably with the Catholic identity of a considerable portion of the Polish population. In this context, Poles have responded by voting for the Law and Justice party: a hardline Eurosceptic party representing Catholic social conservatism, redistributive economic policies to address inequality, and a rejection of mass immigration.[36] While the Catholic dimension often receives the most attention, the economic context must be considered, as should the reality of faith in Polish life. According to Porter, Catholicism in Poland is often an expression of national identity and independence; and while church attendance is somewhat higher than in other European countries, Catholic identity mostly serves as a narrative that gives meaning and, when combined with an alternative economic model to neoliberalism, represents a distinctly Polish conception of nationhood.[37]

The other majority-Catholic nation in central Europe that has seen the rise of a nationalist movement that invokes religious identity is Hungary. Like Poland, it currently has a populist-nationalist party in government hostile to the EU's liberalism: Fidesz, led by Viktor Orbán. Since his election in 2010, Orbán has consolidated his power in Hungary, taking a noticeably illiberal approach to press and academic freedom and testing the limits of EU tolerance.[38] In terms of social policy, the Orbán government has adopted a conservative approach to the family, offering pro-natal payments and tax benefits while criticising the LGBT movement and feminism. Orbán has argued that only Catholicism, due to its universalist nature, respects the true sovereignty of each nation, and that national self-determination should be the aim of Christian Democracy.[39] In a nation in which fewer than 20% of the population claim to regularly attend mass, Orbán has nonetheless managed to fuse national identity and

---

[34] Viktor Orbán, 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's "State of the Nation" Address', February 10, 2019. Website of the Hungarian Government: https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-state-of-the-nation-address-2019

[35] Phillip Ther and Charlotte Hughes-Kreutzmüller (2016). Europe Since 1989: A History. Princeton University Press. p.78

[36] Kasia Narkowicz (2018). 'Refugees Not Welcome Here': State, Church and Civil Society Responses to the Refugee Crisis in Poland. International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society. 31. pp.357-73

[37] Porter. The Catholic Nation. pp.289-99

[38] Cas Mudde (2019). The 2019 EU elections: Moving the center. Journal of Democracy. 30(4). pp.20-34

[39] National Conservatism. (2020, February 11). Prime Minister Viktor Orbán: Interview with Chris DeMuth, Rome, 2020 [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WP8xzxH7YY.

religion, drawing on Hungary's Catholic heritage to portray Islam as a threat and restrict immigration while rejecting multiculturalism.[40]

After victory in the 2014 elections and the migrant crisis of 2015, Orbán turned his attention to the EU, Angela Merkel, and the multicultural West, accusing their liberal approach to immigration and human rights of threatening the existence of Christian Europe. [41] The assertiveness of the Hungarian government on matters of law, governance and immigration remains a problem for an EU committed to integration on liberal terms, and that promotes itself as the bastion of global liberalism, but one that must be correctly diagnosed and understood. The popularity of Orbán both within Hungary and amongst populist-leaning conservatives throughout Europe shows that his version of populist-nationalism strikes a chord with critics of the liberal EU.[42] While populist policies and rhetoric may be problematic and fit uncomfortably with liberal ideology, the challenge for the EU is to address legitimate criticisms of its own approach put forth by figures such as Orbán; to recognise that this movement is what Mudde describes as a 'democratically illiberal' response to 'undemocratic liberalism'.[43]

'Elitism' versus tradition: Catholic identity as a response to liberal pan-Europeanism

It is not surprising that the most ardent supporters of the EU are relatively mobile in terms of work and lifestyle, and cosmopolitan in outlook: David Goodhart's 'citizens of anywhere', for whom liberalism provides opportunity and the EU represents their interests.[44] This cohort stand in contrast with the 'losers' of globalization: the 'citizens of somewhere', who tend to maintain life-long and inter-generational ties with a community and country, or who may, due to the disruptive effects of neoliberalism, desire a return to this way of life.[45]

History and traditions are, for many, part of what binds the community, and the failure of mainstream political parties to recognise this in recent times has meant that culture, including religion, has become central to the populist response. Mudde describes populist ideology as a way of dividing society between the 'corrupt elite' and the those who represent 'general will of the people'.[46] This language is typical of populism - an inarticulate, and perhaps mis-directed, yearning for a return to communitarian politics and the common good. Orbán himself has, at various times, expressed his support for what he calls 'illiberal democracy': importantly, in 2018 he stressed that, according to his understanding of such a model, this did not involve bringing religion or articles of faith into the public sphere, but rather preserving the Christian culture that gave rise

---

[40] Emily Schultheis (2018, January). Viktor Orbán: Hungary doesn't want 'Muslim invaders'. Politico. https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-hungary-doesnt-want-muslim-invaders/

[41] Orban: EU's Christian Identity under Threat from Muslim Migrants (2017, April). Visegrad Post. https://visegradpost.com/en/2017/04/02/orban-eus-christian-identity-under-threat-from-muslim-migrants/

[42] Despite Fidesz being suspended by the EEP over 'rule of law' violations, leaders such as Austria's Sebastian Kurz, Poland's Mateusz Morawiecki, and the Bavarian CSU's Manfred Weber broadly supported his criticism of Merkel and the EU'S asylum policies. See: Mudde, The 2019 EU elections', pp.20-34

[43] Mudde. The 2019 EU elections. pp.20-43

[44] David Goodhart (2017). The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics. Oxford University Press.

[45] David Goodhart (2017). The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics. Oxford University Press.

[46] Mudde. The Populist Zeitgeist. pp.541-44

to European societies.[47] In drawing a sharp distinction between liberal democracy and an illiberal version of Christian democracy, Orbán necessarily equates the former with progressivism and multiculturalism, and implies that for Christian culture to be at all preserved, liberalism must be rejected in favour of illiberalism.[48]

Peter Kratochvil's research on the use of religion as a cultural 'weapon' in highly secular nations shows how populism based on religious identity rarely corresponds with actual religious conviction and practice, as evidenced by the continuing decline in religiosity in nations with growing political concern over 'Christian identity'.[49] However, studies such as this generally fail to explore why, even (or, especially) in societies with low levels of religiosity, citizens are increasingly attracted to narratives of culture, tradition, and history, as a way of reasserting a sense of autonomy and rejecting the anti-traditionalism of the liberal era. A project such as pan-European integration requires the support of European citizens, and a sense of common purpose. Without this, it is not obvious why Europeans would accept the increased power of a supranational body over existing national institutions and the nation-state which already function well and have established narratives and traditions. According to Brent Nelson and James Guth, identification with pan-Europeanism is strongest in majority-Catholic nations, while Protestants are less inclined to consider themselves as 'European' or identify with the EU.[50] This is likely due to the more communitarian and less liberal traditions of these nations and reflects the Christian Democratic worldview of the EU's 'founding fathers'. The disconnect between 'elite' liberal culture and those attracted to populist-nationalism is also apparent within the Roman Catholic Church, with the Church hierarchy - despite the ideological liberalism of the EU - remaining committed to European integration and being more sympathetic to refugees and addressing climate change on moral grounds (especially since the election of Pope Francis in 2013), and often labelled elitist by populists such as Salvini, while significant sections of the laity have turned to populism and Euroscepticism.

Perhaps the most misunderstood aspect of the new populist-nationalism is the way in which it differs from old ethno-nationalism. While one must be careful to avoid taking the claims of populist leaders at face value, especially in relation to ethnic bias, there is nevertheless a clear difference between the type of nationalist expression voters are seeking and the overt chauvinism or claims of ethnic/racial supremacy seen in the past. Rather than being opposed to multi-ethnic immigration, the new populist-nationalism is critical of 'multiculturalism' as an ideology and tends to focus more on the need for lower rates of immigration and a more active effort to encourage migrants to conform to the values and civic culture of the host nation.[51] Furthermore, unlike the nationalism that manifested in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth century great powers of Europe, contemporary populist-nationalism presents Christian Europe as vulnerable and

---

[47] Orbán, Viktor (2018, July). Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp. About Hungary. http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-29th-balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp/

[48] Marc F. Plattner (2019). Illiberal democracy and the struggle on the Right. Journal of Democracy. 30(1). pp.5-19.

[49] Peter Kratochvil (2019). Religion as a Weapon: Invoking Religion in Secularised Societies. The Review of Faith & International Politics. 17(1).

[50] Brent F. Nelson and James L. Guth (2016). Religion and the Creation of European Identity: The Message of the Flags. The Review of Faith & International Affairs. 14(1).

[51] Koen Damhuis (2019, July). The biggest problem in the Netherlands: Understanding the Party for Freedom's Politicization of Islam. Brookings.

under threat from much more powerful elite forces and demographically-stronger foreign groups (as Orbán regularly stresses).[52] Kaufmann labels this 'ethno-traditional nationalism' and argues that it is driven by a conservative rather than a reactionary or racially-exclusivist desire to preserve the majority culture and traditions, lest the native majority then be reduced to minority status through rapid demographic change and consequent lack of assimilation.[53] The critique of liberal elites and multiculturalism arises out of the fear that high levels of immigration, combined with the privileging of minority beliefs and customs in certain contexts ('asymmetrical multiculturalism'), will hasten this. [54] Therefore, scholars and others wishing to understand the contemporary populist-nationalist phenomenon must recognise that it is at least partly a response to the imposition of a version of multiculturalism, one often discussed in abstract terms that can be just as distant from the complex, organic reality of societies as the most romantic nineteenth-century nationalism.

Conclusion

Without an alternative pan-European narrative that engages all citizens and embodies their history, culture, and traditions, there is every chance that the EU will not survive, or at least not expand and integrate further. Liberal pan-Europeanism has proven capable of providing high – if unequal – levels of prosperity, and it is undoubtedly superior to the persistent ethnic tensions of the first half of the twentieth century. According to Schuman, European unification was a worthy ideal because of the continent's shared religious and cultural heritage. The original Christian Democratic settlement - a model that represented Europe's unique history and customs and its conception of the dignity of the human person, while working within the liberal state and accommodating pluralism – worked arguably because of its combination of ambition and realistic recognition of the way human societies function. It was distinctly Roman Catholic, was (according to Schuman) based in the idea that democracy was grounded in Christianity and, like the ideology of those attracted to populist-nationalism today, did not fit neatly into the left-right political spectrum. Most of all, it understood the importance of the 'local' as well as the 'civilisational'.

It is clear that populism varies in its expression between European states and there is a growing desire amongst citizens to return to a more communitarian approach to politics and policy. This has implications for our understanding of opposition to EU integration and why significant numbers of conservative Catholics have turned away from the idea of pan-Europeanism and towards Eurosceptic parties. For traditional Christian Democrats in nations strongly influenced by liberalism in recent decades, populist-nationalist parties have, despite their organisational and policy shortcomings, offered an alternative to the mainstream parties through their vigorous rhetorical defence of European Catholic identity and the integrity of the nation-state as the best guardian of both national and European culture. Most importantly, in nations with a communitarian Christian Democratic tradition, they have sought a return to the ideas

---

[52] Orbán, Viktor (2019, February). Prime Minister Viktor Orban's "State of the Nation" Address. https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-state-of-the-nation-address-2019

[53] Eric Kaufmann (2019). Ethno-traditional Nationalism and the Challenge of Immigration. Nations and Nationalism. 25(2). pp.435-448

[54] Eric Kaufmann (2019). Ethno-traditional Nationalism and the Challenge of Immigration. Nations and Nationalism. 25(2). pp.435-448

that served as the foundation for pan-Europeanism in the mid-twentieth century and revived national narratives based on religion and cultural heritage.

Most scholars and observers would agree that leaders such as Orbán, Le Pen, and Salvini are inconsistent, often ill-informed, and display signs of being dishonest and opportunistic: they are not in any sincere way heirs to the EU's founding fathers. However, the success of populists - especially with regard to Euroscepticism - points to a desire for an alternative to liberal pan-Europeanism, and religion is central to how many Europeans conceive of European identity, despite the decline in religious practice. The decline of Christian Democracy since the 1970s explains why the response to demographic decline, large-scale immigration, multiculturalism, social liberalism and neoliberal individualism has taken this distinct populist-nationalist form in nations with a Christian Democratic culture.

References

Blyth, M. (2016, November 15). Global Trumpism. *Foreign Affairs*. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-11-15/global-trumpism

Chadwick, K. (Ed.) (2000). *Catholicism, Politics and Society in Twentieth Century France*. Liverpool University Press.

Damhuis, K. (2019, July 24). The biggest problem in the Netherlands: Understanding the Party for Freedom's Politicization of Islam. *Brookings*.

European Parliament, *Merger Treaty*, July 1, 1965. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=LEGISSUM:4301863&from=EN

European Union. *The Schuman Declaration*. https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/symbols/europe-day/schuman-declaration_en

European Union (1956, September 29). *Konrad Adenauer and the European Integration* [Press statement]. https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=90b35710-947e-00bf-9779-bbab91844282&groupId=252038

European Union, *Alcide de Gasperi: An Inspired Mediator for Democracy and Freedom in Europe*. https://europa.eu/europeanunion/sites/europaeu/files/docs/body/alcide_de_gasperi_en.pdf

European Union, *Konrad Adenauer and the European Integration: An exhibition of the Archive for Christian Democratic Policy of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation*. https://www.kas.de/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=90b35710-947e-00bf-9779-bbab91844282&groupId=252038

Forlenza, R. (2017). The Politics of the Abendland: Christian Democracy and the Idea of Europe after the Second World War. *Contemporary European History*, 26(2).

Franzmann, S. T. (2016). Calling the ghost of populism: The AfD's strategic and tactical agendas until the EP election 2014. *German Politics*, 25(4).

Goodhart, D. (2017). *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics*. Oxford University Press.

Gottfried, P. (2007). The Rise and Fall of Christian Democracy. *Orbis*, 51(4).

Judt, T. (2010). *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*. Vintage Books.

Kalyvas, S. N. (2018). *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe*. Cornell University Press.

Kaufmann, E. (2019). Ethno-traditional Nationalism and the Challenge of Immigration. *Nations and Nationalism*, 25(2).

Kratochvil, P. (2019). Religion as a Weapon: Invoking Religion in Secularised Societies. *The Review of Faith & International Politics*, 17(1).

Krijtenburg, M. (2015). Robert Schuman's Commitment to European Unification: The Inspiring Role of his Roman Catholic Faith. *Philosophia Reformata*, 80(1).

Lees, C. (2018). The 'Alternative for Germany': The rise of right-wing populism at the heart of Europe. *Politics*,.38(3).

Leo XIII. *Rerum Novarum*. Papal Encyclical. May 15, 1981. http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html

Mitchell, M. D. (2012). *The Origins of Christian Democracy: Politics and Confession in Modern Germany*. University of Michigan Press.

Molle, A. (2019). Religion and Right-Wing Populism in Italy: Using Judeo-Christian Roots to Kill the European Union. *Religion, State and Society*, 47(1).

Molteni, Francesco (2017). Religious Change Among Cohorts in Eastern Europe: A Longitudinal Analysis of Religious Practice and Belief in Formerly Communist Countries. *Religion & Society in Central & Eastern Europe*, 10(1).

Monnet, J. (1943, August). Jean Monnet's thoughts on the future. *CVCE.eu*. https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/jean_monnet_s_thoughts_on_the_future_algiers_5_august_1943-en-b61a8924-57bf-4890-9e4b-73bf4d882549.html

Monnet, J. (1950, September). Memorandum from Jean Monnet to Robert Schuman drawing attention to France's role in finding a European solution to the German problem. *CVCE.eu*. https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/memorandum_from_jean_monnet_to_robert_schuman_16_september_1950-en-259c61d1-8fee-488a-bf0d-6e0958e0d222.html

Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government & Opposition*, 39(4).

Mudde, C. (2019). The 2019 EU elections: Moving the center' in *Journal of Democracy*, 30(4).

Narkowicz, K. (2018). 'Refugees Not Welcome Here': State, Church and Civil Society Responses to the Refugee Crisis in Poland'. *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 31.

National Conservatism. (2020, February 11). *Prime Minister Viktor Orbán: Interview with Chris DeMuth, Rome, 2020* [video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9WP8zxH7YY.

Nelson, B. F. & Guth, J. L. (2016). Religion and the Creation of European Identity: The Message of the Flags. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 14(1).

Orban: EU's Christian Identity under Threat from Muslim Migrants (2017, April). *Visegrad Post*. https://visegradpost.com/en/2017/04/02/orban-eus-christian-identity-under-threat-from-muslim-migrants/

Orbán, V. (2018, July 30). Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp. *About Hungary*. http://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-29th-balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp/

Orbán, V. (2019, February 11). Prime Minister Viktor Orban's "State of the Nation" Address. https://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-state-of-the-nation-address-2019

Pelinka, A. (2020). Austrian Politics: 1918 to 2019. *Antisemitism Studies*, 4(1).

Plattner, M. F. (2019). Illiberal democracy and the struggle on the Right. *Journal of Democracy*, 30(1).

Reynié, D. (2016). "Heritage Populism" and France's National Front. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(4).

Schultheis, E. (2018, January 18). Viktor Orbán: Hungary doesn't want 'Muslim invaders'. *Politico*. https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-hungary-doesnt-want-muslim-invaders/

Taggart, P. (2004). Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9(3).

Teney, C., Lacewell, O. P., & De Wilde, P. (2014). Winners and losers of globalization in Europe: Attitudes and ideologies. *European Political Science Review*, 6(4).

Ther, P. & Hughes-Kreutzmüller, C. (2016). *Europe Since 1989: A History*. Princeton University Press.

Venneri, G. (2008). Man of faith and political commitment: Alcide De Gasperi in the history of Europe. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies,* 13(1).

Walt, Vivienne (2018, September 13). "We Want to Change Things from Within": Italy's Matteo Salvini on His Goal to Reshape Europe'. *Time*. https://time.com/5394207/matteo-salvini-time-interview-transcript-full/