

Populism and Religion

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Editorial

When does populism arise? In an existential sense, it arises when people think they are lost, they have lost or that they are on the way to lose dreams, benefits, statutes, positions, essential dimensions of their life, personal or group interests, often acquired through previous struggles or efforts, or when they feel personally endangered. Populism seems appear when there is a perceived crisis of living together in a pluralist context and/or when specific folks feel ignored by global political or economic systems. A nostalgia for an imagined past can creep in supplanting any effort to work towards a future for all. Groups close ranks defensively instead of opening up and welcoming others. Suffering, frustrations, worries, angers accumulate and intersect, backing one another. A sense of aggrieved injustice takes hold. Complaint becomes the mode of empowerment.

And ‘saviours’ emerge for these folks. Gifted speakers and manipulators of symbol and media systems easily exploit popular sentiments of fear and dis-empowerment. Pursuing the colonial principle of ‘divide and rule,’ manipulative leaders scapegoat segments of the population as the preferred strategy of social and political control using social media. Their arguments depend on the simplistic manipulations of binary categories of social and political division and simple vocabulary, cast as ‘plain-speaking’ leadership. Nevertheless, they are also prone to grandiose gestures of crudeness and violence, magnified many times, because these gestures are picked up by a sensationalism hungry media, catapulting them to even greater visibility. Consequently, such sensationalist and outrageous behaviour is perceived to belong ‘to the people’ in opposition to an elite, educated or wealthy group. The ‘elite’ are presented as ones who are corrupted¹ and far from the social realities of ‘the people,’ out of touch with the ordinary. In the outrageous and offensive challenge to the elites, a symbolic defeat of the elites is performed as a spectacle for television. Through the performance of outrageous offense, the populist leader presents as a credible alternative

to the status quo. They present themselves as saviours of a national and global order by expertly referencing a golden past that can be resurrected and a golden future in which the status quo is unchallenged. Here, identity, religion and cultures become emotional touchstones. Forms of nativism, nationalism and identitarian politics are utilized in order to secure popular sentiment against the easily identified ‘foreigners’ and immigrants.

Religion in the hands of populists thus is of particular interest for theologians. Using religion to structure nativist and nationalist collectivity has been particularly effective in various parts of the world. This political power using religion draws on a traditionalist sense of historical religions as representing tradition, stability, and identity. Populist leaders thus succeed in managing and constructing religion and theological arguments by selectively focusing on specific doctrines, eliminating legitimate and peaceful religious leaders and solutions, sterilizing internal freedom.² Religion becomes the tool of the political leader with religious leaders receiving personal benefits.

Why is this issue important for today, for theologians? By analysing what happens in such situations, we can begin to understand how religions and religious systems are manipulated. Theologians need to investigate how religion is easily distorted and how populism co-opts religion. Studies of Christian³ populism points that it is contrary to faith and doctrine and inimical to the life of communion and community. It also demonstrates how the institutional Church may inadvertently stand in the way of democracy. These complex theological issues, with repercussions for how we live into the vision of Vatican II requires robust theological analyses and arguments to counter the cheap distortions of populist religion.

This issue of *Concilium* approaches the topic from three broad perspectives. One is historical and descriptive, putting in view the process of using religion by populist leaders, with essays from different parts and religious contexts of the world. The second perspective is from religious sciences. It deepens the understanding of populism through an analysis of politics, economics and gender concerns. The third is a theological perspective, with studies intersecting with Scripture, political theologies, ethics, dogmatics, and ecclesiology to challenge populism.

The issue’s framework and the first part of the description of world situations are opened by the Bosnian Professor of Theology and Philosophy

at the Sarajevo Franciscan Theologate (Bosnia-Herzegovina), Mile Babić OFM, from his European experience. He addresses the question of populists' opposition in Europe to pluralism, freedom of thought, and the logic inherent to human rationality, preferring instead, arguments that are either *ad hominem* or *ad populum*. In response to them and to their insensitivity, he advocates a focus on the suffering of every other human being in the world as condition for culture and religious belonging. As he argues, articulating that aspect is a precondition of looking for the truth that will set us free.

The Indian Jesuit, Francis Gonsalves SJ, Dean of the Theology Faculty at *Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth* (Pune, India), and Theology and Doctrine Commission's executive secretary of the Catholic Conference of Bishops of India, analyses the many forms of populism that have mushroomed in India due to its complex diversity and size. He clarifies how current Hindutva religious nationalism and its tactics for manipulating history, symbols, and existential fears, is a populist movement with consequences for India's Hindu population as well as for its minoritized citizens. Hinduist traditions, poor masses, religious or subaltern minorities are really threatened by such populist politics.

Dilek Sarmis, a researcher at the *Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales and Centre d'études turques, ottomanes, balkaniques et centrasiatiques/CNRS* (Paris), provides a reflection on the use of religion by populist politics in Turkey. She first presents a historical analysis of the initial republican decades which did not employ religious arguments or sentiments. In the present political context, however, she shows how religious identity is used for a massive remobilisation of Islam for cultural and identitarian motives by the current ruling party and country's president, and how with a such populist perspective, Turkish political values are being deeply transformed.

The second part of this issue, which focuses on social and religious analyses, begins with an essay by François Mabile, who is a Professor in Social Sciences, researcher with the *French Group Religions, Sociétés, Laïcités* (CNRS & EPHE, Paris), and general secretary of the International Federation of Catholic Universities. In the current world marked by deep social inequalities, crisis of political representation and questions of sovereignty, political parties proclaiming strong cultural and religious references recreate hard national identities bounded by rigid borders. The

focus of Professor Mabile's essay hence, is the unexpected return of antiquated religious strategies in public and political spaces, in societies that formerly embraced secularism.

Professor of Theology and Postcolonial Cultures and Dean of Faculty at Pacific School of Religion (California, USA), Susan Abraham, explores the scholarly literature on Donald Trump's populist rhetoric that has been extremely successful with white Evangelical and Catholic American Christians. She argues that Trump's rhetoric subtly deploys the anxieties of white Christians and their sense of loss of privilege and power to reassert traditional and idealized views of masculinity and American citizenship. White Christians ignore Trump's outrageous public behaviour as satire because his displays of outrageous behaviour secures political power within the United States for them. Trump provides white American Christians with a believable figure of muscular masculinity, leaving them to express a specific form of patriotic and muscular Christianity.

The third and last part of the issue modestly challenges populism with theological arguments. Beginning with scriptural narratives, the first essay by Marida Nicolaci, teaching New Testament exegesis at *Facoltà Teologica di Sicilia* (Italy), shows how the modern phenomenon of populism can find parallels of the dynamics of identity building of the People of God in scripture. Questions of pluralism, alterity and differences, appear in these processes and in a constructive rereading of Christian scriptural materials. Such a way of reading scripture provides the way forward for an inclusive human society, fruitful for both individuals and communities, in contrast to the divisive promises of populist leaders.

Andreas Lob-Hüdepohl, Professor of Theological Ethics and Director of *Berliner Institut für Christliche Ethik und Politik* (Germany), provides perspectives from the Christian hope for building bridges and not walls. As Lob-Hüdepohl argues, such hope must arise from the concerns of the 'other' in any community. Populist behaviour, in contrast, tries by many ways to exclude those who are contesting such selective and divisive views of society, denying the fundamental equality of all peoples. As is well known, scare tactics using theologies of destruction and ending are manipulated to create fear and anxiety. Against these apocalyptic scenarios, Christian theologies of hope provide constructive theologies of community and relationship that are able to overcome the mental and social barriers standing in the way of a vision of a united planet.

The Austrian Professor Franz Gmainer-Pranzl, of *Katholisch-Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Salzburg* (Austria), whose research focuses on intercultural philosophy and theology, specifically between Africa and Europe, wonders about the concepts of ‘right populism’ and ‘catholicity’ in a reading of *Lumen Gentium*. He argues that when a current populist religious argument conflates ‘the true folk’ to a ‘Christian society’, it functions as a strategy of myth production for political uses. His conviction is to create an alternative creativity to right-wing populist strategies, by appealing to a new ‘courage to catholicity’, i.e. for an optimistic orientation to the Gospel’s force of liberation and realization in a world of diversities.

The Dean of *Facoltà di Missiologia* (Pontificia Università Urbaniana, Rome, Italy), Carmelo Dotolo, starts from the distortion engendered by and in our democracies which is manifested by a socio-political and cultural fundamental fracture propagated by populism. Facing this hermeneutical conflict and populism’s intentionality in reforming the social framework on a local level, she looks to retrieve Church commitments able to stimulate democratic forces to neutralize populist and authoritarian leaderships. She promotes her public responsibility as ‘People of God’, through her care of an ethic of the community, of the relationship between rights and duties of members in serving their communities, of the praxis for dialogue between multiple cultures and religions, and of an economic framework attentive to integral ecology.

The theological forum addresses two contemporary events. The first paper goes back to last summer’s revelations of sexual abuses in the US Church by the ethicist and Professor of Law and Theology, Kathleen Kaveny (Boston College, Boston, USA). The second from the Master of the Dominican Order, Bruno Cadoré OP (Rome, Italy), offers a reflection on the works of the last Bishops’ Synod on Young People, their Faith and Vocational Discernment,⁴ where he was the moderator of a francophone group.

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Editorial

Notes

1. Cas Mudde & Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2017.
2. Stefan Orth & Volker Resing (eds), AfD, *Pegida und Co. Angriff auf die Religion?*, Herder, 2017.
3. Walter Lesch (ed), *Christentum und Populismus*, Herder, 2017.
4. <http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en/fede-discernimento-vocazione.html>