

THE CHALLENGE OF THE INTERTWINING OF RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM AND POPULISM

O desafio da interligação entre nacionalismo religioso e populismo

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Abstract:

A widespread viewpoint among scholars on populism and nationalism is that Populism and nationalism can coexist or even be at odds with one another, even though they can intersect in some situations. But the fact is that they are generally regarded as distinct political phenomena with their own complexities and implications. Careful investigation of the intellectual foundations, historical settings, and sociopolitical dynamics of nationalism and populism is necessary to comprehend their relationship.

The complex relationships between nationalism, religion, and populism in contemporary politics highlight the intersections of identity, ideology, and power. Investigating the historical, cultural, and economic settings in which these movements originate and develop is essential to understanding this dynamic. Particularly, right-wing populism which pits “the people” against alleged external and domestic foes, has a strong nationalist bent. the interplay of religion, nationalism, and populism is crucial in shaping modern politics worldwide, with significant implications for pluralism, democracy, and social justice.

Comprehending the complex interrelationships of religion, nationalism, and religious populism is crucial to appreciating modern politics’ workings and the forces that propel diverse social and political movements globally. It necessitates a complex analysis that considers socio-cultural dynamics, historical legacies, and the changing role of nationalist and religious beliefs in influencing political environments.

Keywords: religion, religious nationalism, populism.

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Resumo:

Um ponto de vista generalizado entre os estudiosos do populismo e do nacionalismo é que o populismo e o nacionalismo podem coexistir ou até mesmo estar em conflito, embora se possam cruzar em algumas situações. Mas o facto é que eles são geralmente considerados fenômenos políticos distintos, com as suas próprias complexidades e implicações. É necessária uma investigação cuidadosa das bases intelectuais, dos contextos históricos e das dinâmicas sociopolíticas do nacionalismo e do populismo para compreender a sua relação.

As relações complexas entre nacionalismo, religião e populismo na política contemporânea destacam as interseções entre identidade, ideologia e poder. Investigar os contextos históricos, culturais e económicos em que esses movimentos se originam e se desenvolvem é essencial para compreender essa dinâmica. Particularmente, o populismo de direita, que coloca “o povo” contra supostos inimigos externos e internos, tem uma forte tendência nacionalista. A interacção entre religião, nacionalismo e populismo é crucial na formação da política moderna em todo o mundo, com implicações significativas para o pluralismo, a democracia e a justiça social.

Compreender as complexas inter-relações entre religião, nacionalismo e populismo religioso é fundamental para apreciar o funcionamento da política moderna e as forças que impulsionam diversos movimentos sociais e políticos em todo o mundo. Isso requer uma análise complexa que leve em consideração as dinâmicas socioculturais, os legados históricos e a mudança no papel das crenças nacionalistas e religiosas na influência dos ambientes políticos.

Palavras-chave: religião, nacionalismo religioso, populismo.

Introduction

Right now, our world is going through a phase where political ideas are getting more and more extreme, as if we had suddenly lost the ability to be reasonable, self-controlling, and steadiness that are essential to social and human connections. Remarkably, this tendency isn't exclusive to underdeveloped societies but also the wealthiest ones are experiencing and exhibiting it as well.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the interplay between religious nationalism and the populist movement, while remaining within the established parameters. These factors are instrumental in shaping political dialogue and influencing societal governance. A notable relationship exists among religion, nationalism, and populism. The analysis will concentrate on Right-wing populism and its explicit utilization of religious elements in the context of nationalist fervor and ideologies.

Research on this topic could delve into various aspects, including (i) the use of religious symbols (ii) rhetoric in populist movements, (iii) the mobilization of religious communities for nationalist agendas, and (iv) the implications for minority groups and democratic institutions. But this research would be extended beyond the requirements and boundaries of this article if we would go into detail on all these aspects (LIDDIARD, 2024. pg.1.).

Religious Nationalism a political ideology

Religious nationalism being a political ideology seeks to fuse religious identity² with the identity of the nation-state³.

² Religious identity is deeply personal and multifaceted, influenced by individual experiences, upbringing, education, and social interactions. It can provide individuals with a sense of meaning, belonging, and purpose, as well as shape their relationships with others and their engagement with broader society (BOZONELOS, *et al*, 2021:1).

³ A nation-state is a group of people with a shared culture and heritage who also operate under a common government. "Nation" refers to the shared culture, while "state" refers to the government that has sovereignty over that nation. In this sense, the United States is itself a state (CANTWELL, 2023:1).

John Kampfner, writing about the rising of the Right-Wing Populism attests that, most probably it will sweep the West in 2024 and that could be a matter of concern because would cause the erosion of liberal democracy, particularly in the United States and Europe not seen since the end of the Cold War. The potential reelection of former U.S. President Donald Trump is seen as a particularly concerning development (KAMPFNER, 2023. pg.1.).

2024 is not just an election year. Maybe it's election year.... Globally, more voters than ever before in history will go to the polls, as at least 64 countries (plus the European Union) – representing a combined population of around 49% of the world's population – are expected to hold national elections, the results of which, for many, will be consequential in the coming years (EWE, 2023. pg.1.).

According to Rogers Brubaker (BRUBAKER, 2012 pg.3,4.). it is clear that religion influences the origin and development of nationalism through the appropriation of religious symbols and narratives. But religion not only serves to define the nation's boundaries; it supplies myths, metaphors, and symbols, central elements in the discursive or iconic representation of the country (in a way that relates to the study of discourse) (BRUBAKER, 2012. pg.9.).

Christian Nationalism is, “an identity built on the claim that... [country] was founded as a Christian nation, that it was based on Judea-Christian principles, and, most importantly, that we have strayed from that foundation, from our godly roots” (SEIDEL, 2022. pg.2.).

“Religious Nationalism in its most manifest expression is a complex set of identification in which both components of the combination are inseparable, when one’s nationality is “religious” and when one’s religion is “national”.” (I’ZIDKIYAHU, 2015. pg.13.). Similarly, when one's religion is considered “national”, it implies that

religious beliefs play a central role in defining the collective identity of the nation. But we have to keep in mind that,

...when ethnic or religious views of the people are combined with constructs of the people as one, populism becomes exclusionary and antidemocratic. Under these conditions, populism can be a threat to the basic values of modernity such as a plural, critical, and inclusive civil society (DE LA TORRE; SRISA-NGA, 2022. pg.26.).

Populism and its use of nationalist religiosity

“Nationalism and populism are not necessarily the same, although they do have elective affinities and often – but not always – coincide” (BONIKOWSKI, 2018. pg.1.).

Most populists describe themselves as hardworking, patriotic, and usually, God-fearing people who support the non-establishment elite, and

Specifically, populism begins with the constitution of a virtuous “people,” then envisions a robust “enemy,” decries the current “system” and finally finds the promise of reform in “apocalyptic confrontation” (LEE, 2006. pg.358.).

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Cornel West, in “*Populism: A Black Socialist Critique*” affirms,

The weaknesses of populism consist of the worst of the xenophobia and jingoistic tradition of a European settler society: racism, sexism, homophobia, inward and backward-looking, preoccupied with preserving the old ways of life, defensive, provincial, and, at times, conspiratorial (BOYTE; RIESSMAN, 1986. pg.208.).

Populists politicize religion in two ways. (i) The first is, religious populism understood as when “a revealed and scriptural religion is used to sanctify a cause” (KALTWASSER; *et al*, 2017 pg.446. s.). Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism have been used by populists to claim that they are doing “God’s work here on earth against its Godless enemies” (KALTWASSER; *et al*, 2017. pg.445.). (ii) The second politicization of religion is the sacralization of a group or a leader as a “transcendental

force that will fundamentally change the mundane everyday evil politics” (KALTWASSER; et al, 2017:446). Marxists, nationalists, fascists, and populists have embarked on projects of sacralization of politics. Religious tropes and imaginaries cast enemies as evil, the people as sacred, and a leader as a redeemer whose mission is to save the people” (DE LA TORRE; SRISA-NGA, 2022 pg.221.).

Benjamin Moffitt has explained that populism is a “political style” rather than a fixed ideological system (MOFFITT, 2016:37,38). Pierre-Andre Taguieff argues that populism “does not embody a particular type of political regime, nor does it define a particular ideological content. It is a political style applicable to various ideological frameworks” (TAGUIEFF, 1995. pg.9.).

Carlos de la Torre and Treethep Srisa-Nga claim that, “What sets populists apart from fascist and Marxist political theologies is that they use elections and not dictatorship to bring redemption” (De LA TORRE; SRISA-NGA, 2022. pg.1.).

The term “populism” is often used broadly to encompass political messages and styles that may be viewed as far beyond the mainstream political consensus or transgressive. However, populism also has a narrower, more precise meaning. It denotes political parties and leaders that are anti-establishment and that divide society into two groups: self-serving elites and good, ordinary people (ROHAC; *et al*, 2018 pg.1.).

Religiosity, its role and cultural Christianity, often linked to national myth and nostalgia, are themes that have been co-opted by populist movements. The why this happens has an explanation, religion still remains having an immense fascination to give meaning and purpose, that’s why we can churches driven to point out and teaching about purpose, to people’s existence.

José Brissos-Lino a well-known Portuguese Science of Religions scientist argues that,

Right and left populism is a cancer that has been corroding our world, particularly in Europe and the Americas. In some cases, populists rose to power through voting, palace tricks or revolutionary movements... Once in

power, populists begin to destroy all social harmony according to the old maxim of “divide and rule”. If for some the fault lies with the communists or the left, for others it is the capitalists or the right, for others [still] it are the gypsies, and for others it is the immigrants (BRISSOS-LINO, 2023. pg.1.).

Populism, especially right-wing populism that differs from the leftwing populists, “that tend to construct the people with political and socioeconomic criteria as those excluded by neoliberal elites” (De LA TORRE; SRISA-NGA, 2022. pg.26.), has taken advantage of religious nationalism to be able to emerge and assert itself in several nations. Blatant examples are Brazil, Italy, USA and very recently Portugal and Argentina.

There is substantial consensus in the political science literature concerning the nucleus definition of populism, “It is a form of politics predicated on a fundamental moral opposition between an irredeemably corrupt elite and a virtuous people, with the latter seen as the only legitimate source of political power” (MUDDE, 2017. pgs. 29-31).

Main signs of religious populism practice within nationalist religiosity

The Italian Loris Zanatta (Forlì, 1962), Professor of Latin American History at the University of Bologna, specialized in the history of Latin America and author of several books on Peronism, published “*El Populismo*”, an attractive and interesting essay and in an interview he affirms,

Populism embodies, in the age of the masses, the ancient religious worldview according to which the earthly order reflects the divine order and is essentially harmonious. Hence its typical characteristics: on the one hand, it is inclusive and provides essential goods, such as a sense of identity and collective destiny; On the other hand, it is intolerant of pluralism and has a totalitarian impulse, subjecting the individual to the whole (DEMARCHI, 2014. pg.1.).

The religious populism, a subtype of populism, has a dual dimension, (i) an openly religious manifestation, in the form of the politicization of religion; and (ii) a subtler religious manifestation, tied to the sacralization of politics in modern-day societies (ZÚQUETE, 2017. pg.1). “Religious populist movements serve to reenchant the world and display the belief that human and divine age and divine agency are interrelated” (ZÚQUETE, 2017. pg.18.).

Some of the main signs of religious populism practice within nationalist religiosity are as follows.

Mal practice of religious populism

The repeated practice of exaggeration, lies, manipulation and what is conventionally called post-truth is one of the most evident signs. In religious circles, it appears that faith has been replaced by magical thinking (BRISSOS-LINO, 2024:1).

There are three main elements of populist discourse (i) reference to ‘the people’, (ii) criticism of ‘the elite’, and (iii) exclusion of ‘others’ (BENNETT, *et al*, 2020. Pg. 23.).

This is used time and again via their access to social media and media opportunities.

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Populists are often very opportunistic about their media opportunities, willing to align themselves with tabloid and ‘low’ forms of media to reach ‘the people’, blurring the line between politics and entertainment in the process (MOFFITT, 2016. pg. 86.).

Within the tone of religious populism there is a force to distort the Holy Scriptures as if God is obliged to carry out what is intended because, in this kind of populism, there are no doubts or mysteries in spiritual things. The only escape will be that, if God does not fulfill it, it is because the person has a lack of faith or, worse, the person has hidden sin in his/her life.

The exaggeration, lies, and manipulation are taking advantage of the evangelical section in the USA. This was openly demonstrated by Donald Trump in his first election in 2017, that was plainly exposed in February 16.02.2024, by the court, in a guilty

condemnation payment of \$354.9 million penalty and a 3-year ban in New York civil fraud case (QUEEN; COHEN, 2024. pg.1.). The judge Justice Arthur F. Engoron said that, “the former president’s “complete lack of contrition” bordered on pathological... The judge also ordered that they [Trump and his children] pay substantial interest, pushing the penalty for the former president to \$450 million, according to the attorney general, Letitia James” (BROMWICH; PROTESS, 2024. pg.1.). Appearing on an interview, concerning his indictment, to Fox News Channel and broadcast during Laura Ingraham’s primetime hour on the network, Donald Trump affirmed that, “It is a form of Navalny, it is a form of communism, of fascism...” (COOPER; BARROW, 2024. pg.1.).

“doubled down Tuesday [21.02.2024] on comparing his criminal indictments to the circumstances of Russian dissident Alexei Navalny, the top political opponent of Russia’s autocratic leader Vladimir Putin who died in a remote arctic prison after being jailed by the Kremlin leader... Trump then pivoted to himself, repeating his assertions that the prosecutions against him are driven by politics despite no evidence that Biden or the White House ordered them... [USA] is turning into a communist country in many ways” (COOPER; BARROW, 2024. pg.1.).

Donald Trump (22.02.2024) was present to a room full, about three thousand, of Christian communicators at the Gaylord Opryland Resort in Nashville and the event was part of the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) 2024 International Convention. This organization has a membership that represents hundreds of millions of listeners, viewers, and readers (CHAMBERLAIN, 2024. pg.1.). Addressing the crowd Salem Radio Network’s talk show host Hugh Hewitt said, “that the former President is unpredictable. “But no matter what he says, it will be animated by a deep, deep love for America and the Constitution.” Then Hewitt decried and recasts ‘Christian Nationalism’ label and stated that “Every time you hear secular absolutist media use the term ‘Christian Nationalist,’ understand they’re trying to scare American independence into believing that we are something that we are not” (JACKSON, 2024. pg.1.). When

Donald Trump took the stage “recognized the Christian communicators in the audience with uncharacteristic praise for members of the media” He referred to them as “brave, independent Christian journalists” (JACKSON, 2024. pg.1.); (CHAMBERLAIN, 2024. pg.1.) and not surprisingly he added,

I’m here today because I know that to achieve victory in this fight just the battles of the past, we still need the hand of our Lord and grace of Almighty God... We don’t answer to bureaucrats [in Washington D.C.] but to God in heaven (JACKSON, 2024. pg.1.).

Although Trump has switched party affiliations five times since 1987, he stated,

How any Christian can vote for a democrat—Christian or person of faith—how you can vote for a democrat is crazy. It’s crazy... But no one will be touching the cross of Christ under the Trump administration. I swear to you, that will never happen. Never happen... We will restore faith and family to the center of American life and we will restore power to the people. Ladies and gentlemen, with your help and God’s grace the great revival of America begins on November 5, 2024 (JACKSON, 2024. pg.1.).

Trump clearly personifies the figure of a Champion Messiah who wants to impose a religious nationalism restoring the values of a Christianity that, as he himself said, “no previous president has done” (JACKSON, 2024. pg.1.). He even was supported by evangelical pastors.

According to United Press International (UPI), a pastor from Ohio, William Dunfee, was among the 1,500 suspects who faced felony charges for their actions that day [Jan. 6, 2021 after a speech made by former President Donald Trump urging supporters to “fight like hell,” the mob threatened the lives of Congress members as they took over the building]. Dunfee “used a bullhorn to egg them on, falsely proclaiming Trump’s lie that the 2020 election was stolen” ... Pastor William Dunfee [was] sentenced to 30 Months in Prison (FIRESTONE, 2024. pg.1.).

A previous example (June 30.06.2023) is Brazil’s former president, Jair Bolsonaro, that was barred by the highest electoral court from running for office for 8 years. The

accusation was, spreading false information about Brazil's electoral system that brought its credibility into question (JONES; JOHN, 2023. pg.1.).

The most recent case is that of Javier Milei, the new Argentine president, an eccentric known as “El Loco” and “the wig” due to his ferocity and unruly mop of hair, who talks to the dead dog and who had unknown how many dogs cloned mastiffs and views them as his “children with four paws”. (BILLER; POLITI, 2023. pg.1.). The Right-wing populist,

Milei opposes feminist policies and abortion, which Argentina legalized in recent years, and has proposed a plebiscite to repeal the law. He also rejects the notion humans have a role in causing climate change. In a television appearance, he denounced Pope Francis, who is Argentine, as an “imbecile” for defending social justice and called the head of the Roman Catholic Church “the representative of malignance on Earth” (BILLER; POLITI, 2023. pg.1.).

As the time goes by many other examples, unfortunately, will come to the light showing that the personal agenda of individuals or small groups was the main goal not the community or the nation. And for that they resorted to all sorts of strategies even crimes.

The biblical text has been used, by populist religious people, with a distorted and even wrong exegesis in an insistent and habitual way, but with the characteristic, normally to meet their own interests and pre-conceived ideas. The fact is that the illiteracy of ordinary citizens leads them to be attracted without question by the charisma of the leader.

However, cultural and religious prejudices towards the Scriptures, together with biblical illiteracy and even a gross lack of knowledge of its content, even by many who claim to be Catholic or from another Christian tradition, can justify so many wrong ideas and false concepts regarding it (BRISSOS-LINO, 2024. pg.1.).

1. Practice of lack of honesty

Within the practice of the religious populism, honesty of admitting doubt is lost along the way, unaware that there is no faith without doubt. Mainly the Christian faith being the means to a relational end, a relationship with Jesus, implicitly has the element of doubt that will benefit faith because, when doubt drives us to explore our relationship with Jesus, we will come to the conclusion that we need to go much deeper.

Questions about faith are not a bad thing, on the contrary, questions are necessary for learning and growth. There must be a development of the habit of asking questions honestly in matters of faith relationships, whether those relationships are with others or with God. Doubt is deeply human and no one is exempt to it and we shouldn't be ashamed to expose it.

The apostle Paul is advising young Timothy about what kind of man should be entrusted with the office of deacon in order to serve the local church body in 1 Timothy 3:9. Paul uses the Greek phrase “τὸ μυστήριον τῆς πίστεως” that is translated “*the mystery of faith*”, “*the mystery of the faith*”, or “*the deep truths of the faith*” depending on the translation. Paul always uses the word “*mystery*” to refer to the content of faith newly revealed by Christ Jesus through His apostles (Romans 16:25–27; Ephesians 1:7-10) (LARSON, 2004. pg.1.). What Paul is saying to Timothy is that he has to find mature believers, men who understand, comprehend or perceive, the message of the gospel and are living it out. So, Paul is not against reasoning about the faith.

A faith without doubts is like a body with a deficient immune system. An individual who goes through life indifferent to his doubts, without ever trying to find answers to his questions of faith, will be a believer who will eventually find himself defenseless against even the smallest of doubts.

The populist position of lack of honesty of admitting doubt will create a dangerous extremism because it will, later on, deny our humanity.

2. Practice of control

For religious populists there is a certain difficulty in acknowledging that they are not the ones in control. “Populists portray themselves as the guardians of the “will of the people” referencing the tradition of a less state-centric notion of “popular sovereignty” with an emphasis on political struggles and legitimacy” (SCHMIDTKE, 2023. pg.914.). If for the apostle Paul as manifested in 1 Corinthians 13:11-13⁴, to be a mature and seasoned individual in the faith is to give up a certain childishness with its naivety and to understand, because we possess a human condition that is limited by nature and finite that makes us not being able to discern and perceive God and what concerns Himself with absolute clarity, then we will not be, at all, in absolute control. This is reiterated by the apostle James in his book in James 4:13-17⁵.

This has been the ideal ground for the authoritarianism.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:11-13 Amplified Bible. “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. 12 For now [in this time of imperfection] we see in a mirror dimly [a blurred reflection, a riddle, an enigma], but then [when the time of perfection comes, we will see reality] face to face. Now I know in part [just in fragments], but then I will know fully, just as I have been fully known [by God]. 13 And now there remain: faith [abiding trust in God and His promises], hope [confident expectation of eternal salvation], love [unselfish love for others growing out of God’s love for me], these three [the choicest graces]; but the greatest of these is love.” Available in: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+13%3A11-13&version=AMP>. Retrieved: 16.02.2024.

⁵ James 4:13-17 Amplified Bible. “Come now [and pay attention to this], you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and carry on our business and make a profit.” 14 [a]Yet you do not know [the least thing] [b]about what may happen in your life tomorrow. [What is secure in your life?] You are merely a vapor [like a puff of smoke or a wisp of steam from a cooking pot] that is visible for a little while and then vanishes [into thin air]. 15 Instead [c]you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and we will do this or that.” 16 But as it is, you boast [vainly] in your pretension and arrogance. All such boasting is evil. 17 So any person who knows what is right to do but does not do it, to him it is sin.” Available in: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=++James+4%3A13-17+&version=AMP>. Retrieved: 16.02.2024.

a) The “authoritarian populism”

The “authoritarian populism” is a new wave of ‘authoritarianism’ that is very widespread. This type of populism makes the “claim to speak on behalf of the people in contrast to various so-called out-groups: immigrants, racial and ethnic minorities, and all those who disagree with the populists’ prescriptions” (ROHAC; et al, 2018. pg.1.). Within the set-up in Europe this type of populism is gaining ground due to a decline of trust in the democratic governments and political institutions with their political dysfunction bringing up the idea of an unresponsive citizens’ concern in the affairs of governmental rule.

The “authoritarian populism” brings up dark considerations that shapes destructive attitudes toward race, immigration, and globalization.

A recent example is the rapid growth of the Portuguese religious populist party ‘Chega’. In the very recent elections for parliament and a new government, they obtained an astonishing number of 50 parliamentarians, becoming the third largest political force in the country more than quadrupling the 2022 result. José Filipe Pinto political scientist and specialist in the study of populism concludes, “it is yet another example that confirms the rule that cultural-identity populism is on the rise in Europe and Latin America” (CÉU, 2024. pg.1.). Francisco Seixas da Costa ambassador in France, between 2009 and 2013, highlights,

It is ironic to note that a political formation that has a racist, xenophobic and discriminatory agenda, in which a primary rejection of immigration assumes a very prominent place ends up pleasing those who, no matter how many efforts they make, never fail to be seen in the lands where they live. as continuing to be a foreigner... Deep down, our emigrants are completely integrated even into prejudices, in the discriminatory sense. What is interesting to see is that they transported this to the Portuguese ballot boxes in these elections (da COSTA, 2024. pg.1.).

The fear of the “populist threat” has been rising due to the characteristics that usually are attributed to authoritarian regimes although not all leaders of movements or authoritarian regimes are populists. This is due to a typological triad well known to older political theorists:⁶ democracy/authoritarianism/totalitarianism.

The threat of authoritarian populism will not decrease unless there is new offers a credible agenda which aims to (i) improve people’s lives (ii) government to support human dignity, prosperity and freedom and, (iii) be more appealing to the citizens than the alternatives of the religious populism.

3. Lack of accountability and avoidance of confrontation

In the West religious populism is basically taking advantage of the principles of Christianity and is thriving in the so-called Christian nations. But one of the principals that is avoided, at all costs, by this type of populism is, the principle of accountability.

a) The Christian principle of accountability and the lack of it

To be accountable is strange and totally foreign to the religious populists.

There are many definitions for accountability but we would say that to be accountable is manly, wise boundaries of personal freedom.

In accountability there is protection against excess. Freedom is not libertinism and accountability keeps us balanced and guards us from taking liberties into extremisms. Unbridled freedom may seem like a great way of

⁶ See Hannah Arendt's pioneering work, “The Origins of Totalitarianism” (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1951), Part 3 “Totalitarianism”. For a discussion of the concept of authoritarianism, see Guy Hermet, “L’Autoritarisme” in Madeline Grawitz and Jean Leca, eds., “Traite de Science Politique”, vol. 2, “Les Regimes Politique Contemporain” (Paris: PUF, 1985.. pg. 269-312.). 269-312).

life but it can be a recipe for disaster. Is there anyone, a commission, a supervision group that one gives account to for the way one handles money, time, and relationships?

Jesus taught His followers to confront believers who strayed spiritually and, if necessary, practice “tough love” in Matthew 18:15-17 *“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over”, “If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector”*. We are to *“spur one another on to love and good deeds” and, at times, even “rebuke one another”* Luke 17:3. The biblical standard, that requires to model mature character and a godly lifestyle as an example to others is nonexistent within the frame of the religious populism and the reaction is promptly thrown *“This is exactly why people are disillusioned. You're judgmental and lack grace. Jesus loved sinners, yet here you are condemning them!”* this brings a lack of credibility and harmony. In accountability there is a taking of responsibility.

Accountability entails a degree of vulnerability. Religious populists often remain closed off, concealing their identities, past experiences, and personal weaknesses. This lack of transparency prevents anyone from knowing how to provide assistance, resulting in their self-imposed isolation.

Although accountability cannot be regarded as a complete solution, the mere statement of “I hold you accountable” does not inherently ensure accountability. It is vital to continually cultivate that relationship while embracing transparency and honesty.

The leadership within the religious populists is sovereign in practice taking the leader to be seen as a Messiah, a Redeemer, a new Christ and this takes the leader figure to a position that is undisputed. “The power left vacant

by theological or religious categories like “God” or “Christ” is replaced by human agents such as class in Marxism, and the people and the leader in populism. These human agents are not only endowed with the category of sacredness but are attributed with supernatural traits” (DE LA TORRE; SRISA-NGA, 2022. Pgs. 240, 241.).

In recent elections, in Portugal, the right wing populists grew in percentage of elections having reached the 3rd political force (24.10.2023), getting support from Europe's far-right that gathered in Portugal, showing support for Chega led by André Ventura (DEMONY, 2023. pg. 1.).

For the religious populists the words “obey” and “submit” have a practical religious connotation mainly in the scenario of the Religious Nationalism. The people will bow down to the main figure of the religious populism without questioning. May we be reminded the writings of C.S. Lewis in his literary work “*Mere Christianity*” where he writes “The clergy are those particular people within the whole Church who have been specially trained and set aside to look after what concerns us as creatures who are going to live forever” (LEWIS, 2001. pg. 83.). This could be applied to the religious populism leadership at large.

b) The refrainment of confrontation

Although the Christian life is meant to be lived in close community the religious populists avoid at all costs to be confronted by different schools of thought, other groups, ideas or religions. The rule of life according to Bible that teaches to “*love one another*”⁷, “*bear one another's burdens*”⁸, “*encourage*

⁷ John 13:34

⁸ Galatians 6:2

one another”⁹, “*pray for one another*”¹⁰, and “*be at peace with one another*”¹¹ is restricted to its own group excluding the others.

Conclusion

This paper, due to the required space, just sets the stage for an in-depth exploration of the complexities and dynamics at the intersection of religion, nationalism, and populist politics.

Most scholars agree that nationalism and populism are not necessarily the same, “although they do have elective affinities and often – but not always – coincide” (BONIKOWSKI; *et al*, 2018. pg. 3.).

The persistent diabolization of ethnic groups, foreigners and democratic institutions, by the wright-wing populists, has been used with success to attract those who have an inclination for the religious nationalism.

“Populists have used religious beliefs to mobilize followers, to give legitimacy to their projects, and to give meaning to their missions. If politics is based on reason and emotions, the power of the sacred to mobilize should not come as a surprise” (DE LA TORRE; SRISA-NGA, 2022. Pg. 239.).

The goal of this paper is to set the stage for a deeper exploration of the intricate dynamics that arises at the intersection of religion, nationalism, and populist politics especial the religious populism.

In reality there is a connection between religion, nationalism, and religious populism. This per may be just the beginning of a more profound investigation into these dynamics, and the topic demands further exploration to fully comprehend its nuances.

⁹ 1 Thessalonians 5:11

¹⁰ James 5:16

¹¹ Romans 12:18

Religious populist leaders often leverage religious beliefs, especially in the so-called Christian countries, to mobilize supporters and to draw voters, doing so they lend validity to their agendas. Appealing to the national religious cultures and sentiments, they not only pretend but achieve a galvanization of followers, and thus validate their political projects and impregnate their missions with meaning and purpose that will please their followers and supporters.

In the contemporary political landscapes, we can observe a intricate interplay between religion, nationalism, and populist politics growing somewhat dangerously due to the extremisms and endangering democracy. Although we must bear in mind that while some Christians in spite of their Christian values, support in all fronts, morally inexcusable leaders like Donald Trump or Bolsonaro, others do not do it.

More empirical research is needed to understand the intrinsic implications of religious nationalism intertwined with populism.

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