

Vox populi vox Dei? On the religious roots of populism

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Introduction

Religion is absent from the two dominant narratives about contemporary populism. The first narrative views the roots of the populist revolt in predominantly economic terms: a rejection of the *status quo* on the part of those ‘left behind’ by globalisation. The second narrative emphasises cultural factors: a growing gap between a new, networked generation who are forward-looking and progressive and an older generation who are supposedly nostalgic and reactionary. Common to both narratives is a focus on social divisions between the young and the old, the metropolis and the provinces, those who are university educated and those who are not. These differences can be mapped on to electoral divides such as Remain-Brexit, Clinton-Trump and Macron-Le Pen.

The old opposition of left *versus* right seems increasingly obsolete, its dominance in contemporary political analysis superseded by a new clash between an open and a closed society: open-door immigration, free trade and global intervention *versus* closed borders, protectionism and national preference (‘America First’). This open-closed framework is conceptualised in terms of liberal-cosmopolitan ‘people from nowhere’ and conservative-communitarian ‘people from somewhere’.¹ In her speech to the 2016 Conservative Party conference, the British Prime Minister Theresa May echoed this: “if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere”.²

Yet this conception risks substituting one binary world for another – one in which the main fault lines are economic, cultural and generational rather than ideological, encapsulated by the networked metropolitan youth *versus* the old ‘left behind’. Categories of this sort fail to capture the complex

¹ For opposing versions of essentially the same thesis, see Jeremy Cliffe, *Britain’s Cosmopolitan Future*, Policy Network, May 2015, online at <http://www.policy-network.net/publications/4905/Britains-Cosmopolitan-Future>; David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: Hurst, 2017).

² Theresa May, ‘The new centre ground’, speech to the 2016 Conservative Party conference, Birmingham 5 October 2016, full text available online at <http://www.conservativehome.com/parliament/2016/10/change-has-got-to-come-mays-conference-speech-full-text.html>

composition of urban, suburban and rural communities and the dynamics of inequality, but also religious belief and practice, within them. Simplistic stories about a bright cosmopolitan future or a backlash against globalisation do nothing to integrate economy, culture, class, geography and religion with one another. The forging of a common life requires a political debate based on a public philosophy and a transcendent conversation – one that can address deeper divisions around questions of meaning and belonging.

Such questions concern the pre-political ‘we’, that is to say, all the ties binding us together as people who jointly inhabit neighbourhoods and nations. Beyond economic or cultural tribes, there are also bonds of shared community and common faith. Religion remains central to understanding how and why we are neither isolated individuals nor cogs in a collective machine but rather embodied beings who are embedded in relationships and institutions – from the family to the nation and beyond. As the Dominican theologian St Thomas Aquinas put it, we are social animals even before we are political beings because we are created in the image and likeness of the relational Godhead. As relational beings, we are members of a society and a polity: the city, the country and what the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria in the first century AD called *megalopolis* – a cosmic city that upholds universal principles of human dignity and the common good embodied in particular national or regional practices. Based on a rich conception of the pre-political ‘we’ anchored in plural forms of association, different faiths today have resources to respond to the resurgence of populism whose roots are both secular and religious.

My lecture is divided into four parts. (1) I will explore the nature of populism with a focus on the role of religion in conceptualising the resurgence of populist politics around the globe. (2) I will argue that populism has roots in secular thinking, notably liberalism and its variant of identity politics. (3) I will also suggest populism also has roots in fundamentalist religion, including nationalist and even fascist movements that involve atavistic religious attachment. Finally, I will offer some reflections on religious traditions that can chart alternatives to populism as a debased

form of faith. If perverted faith represents a global threat, it is even more so the case that “in revealed religion lies social salvation”, as John Milbank has suggested.

1. On the nature of populism

What, exactly, is populism? For some, it is a descent into demagoguery based on unmediated emotions and mob rule that subverts representative government and democracy. The English philosopher Roger Scruton, who does not entirely share this view, summarises it well: populists, he writes, “are not democrats but demagogues – not politicians who guide and govern by appeal to arguments, but agitators who stir the unthinking feelings of the crowd”.³ For others, populism is a political movement with mass support for ideas of which liberal elites disapprove, including the effects of globalisation for the less fortunate in our society or the impact of immigration on national identity. Since populism challenges certain features of *liberal* democracy, such as minority rights, it can be described as an “illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism”.⁴

These seemingly rival conceptions, far from being mutually exclusive, suggest in fact that elite liberalism and anti-establishment populism are but two sides of the same coin. Both polarise politics just when democracy needs a transcendent conversation.⁵ Liberals are – or are seen to be – on the side of oligarchical power and technocracy. In response, the insurgents invoke the ‘will of The People’, which risks sliding into a tyranny of the majority. In this manner, both undermine parliamentary democracy and have little to say about what people share as citizens or what binds them together as members of national and cultural communities.

Liberalism is perceived as a threat to the settled ways of life that are the object of popular affection and attachment. The political insurgency that is sweeping global politics is built on supposedly

³ Roger Scruton, ‘Representation and the People’, in Roger Kimball (ed.), *Vox Populi: The Perils & Promises of Populism* (New York: Encounter Books, 2017), p. 119.

⁴ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 116.

⁵ This downward spiral is absent from Yascha Mounk’s *The People Vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

defending the values and identities of the modestly successful – the upper working classes and lower middle-class. They are the ‘hardworking families’ or the ‘just about managing’ who view the wealthy elites and the perceived idle poor as opposite threats: the former because they break the very rules which they impose on everyone else and the latter because they are viewed as living off others and failing to make their own contribution.⁶ These are questions of justice and the pre-political ‘we’, which involve conceptions of the Good and the shared social nature of human beings that cannot be divorced from religious traditions.

For these reasons, it is misleading to suggest that the political insurgency either has a single essence (as for liberals) or is merely a nominal usage deployed at certain junctures (as for Marxists).⁷ Populism is not a defined ideology nor merely a style or method of doing politics. It is both at once, as it involves a strong anti-establishment revolt but tends to be led by members of certain elites (Silvio Berlusconi, Nigel Farage, Donald Trump). The political insurgency is not synonymous with a doctrine of sovereignty, identity, nationalism, democracy or, for that matter, authoritarianism – though it often includes elements of all these ideas. Populism has a tendency to be anti-liberal, but in many cases it is libertarian. In short, it is a complex phenomenon full of contradictions and paradoxes. Thus, *contra* liberals, populism is like a collection of ‘family resemblances’ (Ludwig Wittgenstein) – all kinds of overlapping similarities without a single core essence.

At the same time, *contra* Marxists, it is not just a nominal usage that is deployed to fit the facts. On the contrary, it has arisen in modern times in certain contingent circumstances that nevertheless disclose a specific source and outlook that is more to do with ways of life and a sense of the pre-political ‘we’ than purely economic or purely cultural factors. As John Milbank suggests, “Therefore to claim, as Marxists do [...], that there is ‘no such thing as a universal’ is to be just as

⁶ Joan C. Williams, *White Working Class. Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017); Eric Kaufmann, *Whiteshift. Populism, Immigration and the Future of White Majorities* (London: Penguin, 2018), *forthcoming*.

⁷ For the former position, see Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). For the latter, see the review of Müller’s book by Marco D’Eramo, ‘They, the People’, *New Left Review*, No. 103 (Jan-Feb, 2017), pp. 129-138.

liberal and capitalist as Margaret Thatcher's claim that there is 'no such thing as society'". Crucially, on questions of universals mediated in and through contingent historical processes, the absence of religion and theology is such a glaring omission, for at least two reasons.

First, the history of populism suggests that it is about a revolt against injustice that draws on religious thought and practice. Take the earliest example of the populist insurgency: US President Andrew Jackson in the 1830s and the People's Party in the 1890s. The origins of each can be traced to the many oligarchic features of the US republic with its political cultures of factions and favours (also known today as pork-barrel politics). The US constitution was designed to institute a powerful executive presidency that would protect the interests of the property- and money-owning class.

This power-property-cash nexus (to adapt Thomas Carlyle) explains in part the widespread anti-Washington sentiment throughout rural and small-town America – a deep distrust of oligarchy and the bond between power and money. Thus populist insurrections look to government to break this bond, as in the case of President Andrew Jackson and the People's Party candidate William Jennings Bryan who lost by a small margin in the 1896 presidential elections.⁸ American populism tends towards Caesarism – the tension between the Republic's promise of liberty and self-reliance and the Democratic promise of mass equality and representation. Since the propertied class and the monied aristocracy hold sway, the USA has never had the degree of justice that is required for a lasting consensus, which in turn leads to periodic Caesarian revolts. Once again, John Milbank gets this right: "Here the parallels with the ancient Roman republic are striking. Republican liberty and political participation was for the few; it failed to deliver for the mass of the plebeians. Augustus Caesar who is mentioned in the New Testament first improved their position by giving the people new religious and civic rites and rights, while showing little respect for republican decorum". In short, American populism is partly a religious anti-establishment mobilisation.

⁸ Walter Russell Mead, 'The Jacksonian Revolt: American Populism and the Liberal Order', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 96, no. 2 (March-April 2017), pp. 2-7.

The second reason for focusing on its religious roots is that populism raises the fundamental question of the relationship between citizens and their representatives – the people and the ruler. This is a theological question about the nature of power, the source of authority and ‘the gift of ruling’. Power, authority and rule are not reducible to *realpolitik* in the violent ‘state of nature’ nor to the social contract that somehow regulates this original anarchy. Rather, they are themselves subject to reciprocity and gift. Beyond the formalism of election, which can only think of the people as a compounded mass of individuals, sovereignty and truth usually lie with the people in a more dispersed and variegated way – hence the popular saying *vox populi vox Dei*. Different people and groups have diverse talents and insights – these they effectively share for the good of the whole body politic. The people should variously proffer the fruits of their insights and talents to the sovereign representatives who act in their name and thereby command popular assent.

Inversely, the sovereign power must think of itself as acting reciprocally and distributing gifts – gifts of ordering and nurturing, not simply as imposing a fiat to expand the utility and productiveness of a state and its people. A government that gives must rather pursue the intrinsic fulfilment of its citizens and residents. To rule in this way means that the ‘subjects’ of rule can participate in the ruling and can appropriate its task to themselves. To be thus properly ruled renders them ‘subjects’ even in the ontological sense since something is proposed to them that can form their own good if they respond to it. *Contra* Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, no one is self-originated or self-possessing, but this notion is at the heart of liberalism against which populist revolts are directed, as I shall now argue.

2. The secular roots of populism

For the past half-century or so, Western politics has been dominated by two liberalisms: the cultural liberalism of the left since the 1960s and the economic liberalism of the right since the 1980s. These liberalisms have provided greater personal freedoms and individual opportunities, but can also be seen as populist and authoritarian. For together they have served the purposes of the central state and the globalised market, which have collusively brought about an unprecedented augmentation of

power and concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. In consequence, a new oligarchy now practises a manipulative populism while holding in contempt the genuine priorities of most people. This liberalism is populist because it fuses politics with PR and circumvents parliamentary democracy in favour a direct communication with the people mediated by media moguls.

What is secular about this form of populism? First of all, both liberalisms and their fusion rest on a certain conception of human freedom that excludes any transcendent origin or outlook. The creed shared by the liberal left and right promotes ‘negative liberty’ – the absence of constraints on personal choice except the law and private conscience.⁹ On this view, the law is positive law without any reference to natural law. The liberal notion of private conscience subordinates faith to a secular and therefore supposedly neutral standard of ethics – formal ground-rules of justice in a Kantian framework of transcendental philosophy, as in John Rawls’ influential philosophy.¹⁰

If freedom is defined in purely negative terms, then legal permissions given to some are seen by others as arbitrary refusals. Without any sense of the good we share in common with others, liberal freedom cannot decide between what should be allowed and encouraged and what should not. When rival rights and freedoms collide, power decides and the liberal state ends up ruling over individuals – Hobbes’ Leviathan. Liberal freedom to choose is populist and manipulative because it promotes an illusion of infinite choice while simultaneously foreclosing any debate about the conditions in which choice is exercised. The social theorist Zygmunt Bauman puts this well: “the conditions under which choices are made are not themselves a matter of choice”.¹¹ For liberals, there is no alternative to liberal liberty.

Second, liberalism is secular because it replaces any appeal to the transcendent good with an immanent politics of contract and rights. The liberal claim to neutrality and hence superiority over

⁹ Isaiah Berlin, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 118-172.

¹⁰ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

¹¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 72.

all (other) ideologies rests on the prior assumption that only liberalism can free us from the tyranny of the Good – the imposition of a single conception of goodness, truth and beauty. The liberal tradition with its securing of individual rights based on the social contract overrides any shared quest of commonly accepted goals. This quest is what the ancients and their modern disciples called positive freedom – the liberty to pursue a joint purpose.¹²

The third reason why liberalism is secular is because it is founded up an ontology that is nominalist, voluntarist and atomist. Nominalism refers to the claim that universals are not in things, only in the human mind which projects them on to reality – like names we ascribe to things that resemble each other. Voluntarism is about the primacy of the will over the intellect and the idea that the individual is not simply autonomous but also independent from any other being. Atomism concerns the preeminent status of the individual over all groups or forms of human association.

Liberalism, both as a philosophy and an ideology, is nominalist, voluntarist and atomistic all at once.¹³ It rejects the idea of universals. It believes that the individual can be whoever he or she wants because the will is the highest principle. And it views people as ‘self-possessed’ individuals rather than social beings. Underpinning these assumptions is the liberal belief that we are selfish, greedy, distrust of others and prone violence – whether in the state of nature (as for Hobbes and Locke) or as part of life in society (as for Rousseau).

Far from being merely theoretical, *really existing* liberalism institutes these ideas in practice. The triumph of both social and economic liberalism today more and more brings about the ‘war of all against all’ and the idea of man as self-owning animal that were its presuppositions. But this does not thereby prove those presuppositions, because it is only liberalism that has produced in practice

¹² Benjamin Constant, ‘The liberty of the ancients compared with that of the moderns’, in *Constant: Political Writings*, ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 308-328.

¹³ For a longer exposition of this argument, see John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-liberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), pp. 13-67.

the circumstances that it originally assumed in theory.¹⁴ In this manner, liberalism marks the unnecessary victory of vice over virtue – of selfishness, greed, suspicion and coercion over common benefit, generosity, a measure of trust and persuasive power.

We can contrast this deep anthropological pessimism with George Orwell's trust in 'common decency'.¹⁵ People have always lived through practices of reciprocity, through giving, gratitude and giving again in turn. By way of this process, people achieve mutual recognition and relationality. Most people pursue association and the honour and dignity of being recognised as their main goals. They are relatively unconcerned with becoming much richer than their fellows or achieving great power over them. Indeed, most people wisely realise that such things will only increase their insecurity. Rather they prefer the less spectacular but steadily satisfying life of the shire, like hobbits.

Perhaps the clearest way to illustrate how liberalism contains the secular roots of populism is by briefly charting the rise of identity politics. Both the liberal left and right have embraced variants of identity politics. First the New Left from the mid-1960s onwards equated socialism not with class struggle but with cultural liberation. It preferred progress to tradition, identity to class, and free choice to common purpose. Then the New Right combined a libertarian economics with a corporate capture of the state. This had the effect of aligning conservatism with borderless capitalism and with individual freedom devoid of mutual obligation. The political contest descended into the culture wars, fuelling the flames of tribalism and polarisation on which the liberal elites and the anti-liberal insurgents are now thriving.

What underpins this identity politics is a certain kind of liberalism. Since the late 1960s, it has tended to celebrate the diversity of difference at the expense of civic ties that bind people together above the divides of class, colour and creed. As Mark Lilla has suggested, "in recent years American liberalism has slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity

¹⁴ Jean-Claude Michéa, *L'empire du moindre mal: Essai sur la civilisation libérale* (Paris: Climats, 2007); trans. *The Realm of Lesser Evil: An Essay on Liberal Civilisation*, tr. David Fernbach (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).

¹⁵ George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Penguin, 1989).

that has distorted liberalism's message and prevented it from becoming a unifying force capable of governing".¹⁶ Such a politics lacks in emphasis on commonality and is unable to capture popular imagination about the nation's shared destiny. Identity liberalism is an illiberal, balkanising force that divides people against one another and prevents politics from speaking a language of the common good. It will continue to provoke the rise of the anti-liberal insurgency because, as the American commentator Ross Douthat explains,

people have a desire for solidarity that cosmopolitanism does not satisfy, immaterial interests that redistribution cannot meet, a yearning for the sacred that secularism cannot answer [...]. A deeper vision than mere liberalism is still required — something like "for God and home and country," as reactionary as that phrase may sound. It is reactionary, but then it is precisely older, foundational things that today's liberalism has lost. Until it finds them again, it will face tribalism within its coalition and Trumpism from without, and it will struggle to tame either.¹⁷

In short, identity liberalism is fuelling the populist revolt because liberalism's secular outlook is rejected by people who long for lived fraternity and a sense of sacredness, which liberal individualism and liberal commodification undermine.

3. The fundamentalist roots of populism

Contemporary populism also has roots in a certain religious fundamentalism that is anti-liberal and simultaneously an intensification of certain liberal ideas: the cult of the individual, an invocation of the 'will of the people', unmediated power. In some cases, the drive of democracy towards something like a novel form of fascism that is defined as a blend of left-wing socialism and right-wing nationalism and traditionalism involves religion. More specifically, it is based on an appeal to superficial religious identity rather than supernatural faith and a stigmatisation of both elites as corrupt and foreigners or migrants as 'others' who are not part of the national community.¹⁸

¹⁶ Mark Lilla, 'The End of Identity Liberalism', *New York Times*, 18 November 2016, full article online at https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html?_r=0, expanded as *The Once and Future Liberal. After Identity Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017).

¹⁷ Ross Douthat, 'The Crisis for Liberalism,' *New York Times*, 19 November 2016, full article online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-crisis-for-liberalism.html>

¹⁸ Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell and Olivier Roy, *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion* (London: Hurst, 2016).

This populist hijacking of religion is at work in a new ideology called nationalist traditionalism. Trump and Europe's radical right are the political expression of this ideology, and figures such as Steve Bannon and Alexander Dugin are its theorists. Both have influenced the political mainstream in the USA and in Russia respectively. Their ideas grow out of the so-called Traditionalist Movement.¹⁹ Its main pioneer was René Guénon (1886-1951), a French philosopher who was raised a Roman Catholic, joined the Freemasons, and in later life converted to Sufi Islam. His legacy has influenced both Bannon and Dugin. The main idea is twofold. First, certain ancient faiths – such as medieval Catholicism, eastern Orthodoxy, Sufism, and the Hindu Vedanta – are repositories of shared spiritual truths, revealed to humankind at the dawn of civilisation. Second, these traditions are destroyed by the secular modern West.²⁰ For Guénon, the path to liberation passes through the conversion of small elite groups who act as the vanguard of a spiritual revolution that is necessary for the success of a political revolt against liberal modernity.

Guénon's followers include Julius Evola, an Italian intellectual whose racial theories influenced interwar Fascism. Evola was cited by Bannon in a much-notice talk at a conference hosted by the Human Dignity Institute in the Vatican in 2014. Like Guénon, Evola denounced the spiritual emptiness of liberal modernity. But unlike Guénon who emphasised the importance of proper spiritual conversion, Evola promoted a form of religious racism aimed at inciting popular uprisings wherever possible.²¹ Bannon has distanced himself from the white supremacism of Richard Spencer and other 'alt-right' figures inspired by Evola. But he nonetheless shares Evola's belief in political change without waiting for a spiritual transformation. This outlook underpins Bannon's praise for what he called "a global tea-party movement [...] a center-right populist movement of the middle

¹⁹ Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁰ René Guénon, *La crise du monde moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), trans. *The Crisis of the Modern World*, tr. Marco Pallis *et al.* (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001).

²¹ Julius Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World*, tr. Guido Stucco (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1995).

class, the working men and women in the world who are just tired of being dictated to by what we [Breitbart] call the party of Davos.”²²

Both before and since being sacked by Trump and then Breitbart, Bannon has been dismissed as an apologist of nationalism, nativism and even atavistic ethno-centrism. Derided as a self-styled kingmaker, Bannon is blamed for using Trump, whom he viewed as a ‘blunt instrument’, to inflame cultural and racial tensions – as in the case of the President’s defence of far-right protesters in Virginia and Trump’s endorsement of the racist Alabama senate candidate Roy Moore. Bannon certainly advocates a politics that is unashamedly anti-globalist and nationalist. The intellectual foundations of his version of traditionalism go much further to include a critique of secularisation, Islamic fascism (Bannon’s words) and capitalism. Binding them together is Bannon’s argument that the West has abandoned and even destroyed its “underlying spiritual and moral foundations of Christianity and, really, Judeo-Christian belief.”²³

The populist politics of traditionalism is fundamentalist in a number of closely connected ways. First of all, it rests on a Manichean logic of the good ‘us’ *versus* the evil ‘them’ – the latter being the corrupt elites who despise national traditions and ‘outsiders’ such as Muslim migrants who supposedly threaten the people’s native religious identity. Second, it views the people as pure and monolithic, with a single Rousseauian general will that overrides more diverse and plural expressions of popular interests and identities. Third, both culture and religion are subordinated to the primacy of the people as a homogeneous *ethnos* rather than a pluralist *demos*. The traditions associated with religion are instrumentalised at the service of a nation whose identity is both ethnic and religious – WAPS in America or ‘Christian Europe’.

Fourth, ethno-national identity trumps faith that cuts across borders and is both global and local – in the case of Catholicism the universal Church as mediated through the particular parish, diocese and

²² A transcript of Bannon’s talk can be found online at https://www.buzzfeed.com/lesterfeder/this-is-how-steve-bannon-sees-the-entire-world?utm_term=.mjEWvYdNK#.jpLXQZKEN

²³ *Ibid.*

province. Fifth, the fascist elements of traditionalism are pagan and anti-clerical, while the values that these populist movements put forward smack of puritanism and are often incompatible with religious faith and doctrine. Indeed, many of the far-right traditionalist-nationalist parties now promote secular progressive values, such as feminism and gay rights, in opposition to what they perceive as the creeping Islamisation of the West. Neither these values nor this hostile attitude to Islam are endorsed by the Catholic Church and other more traditional Christian denominations. Sixth and finally, the fundamentalist insurgency seeks to push back Islam by extending secularisation to new areas, including schools, private businesses and the family, which is at the expense of all religions and their presence in the public sphere. After decades of liberal multiculturalism, this traditionalist movement seem to embrace a French-style model of *laïcité* in an attempt to contain the joint advance of both secular liberalism and Islam.

4. Religious responses to populism

To summarise: contemporary populism is an insurgency against a soulless formalistic vacuum that cannot nurture any sense of fond attachment or emotional security. It is also an insurgency against what it considers to be an alien cultural incursion linked to immigration. The former is secular and has its roots in liberalism. The latter is fundamentalist and has its roots in traditionalism. How could and should religions respond?

Both right- *and* left-leaning Catholics and Protestants tend to reject identity liberalism. They find it impossible to accept the secular left threat to marriage, the family, cultural tradition and the sanctity of life, but they also continue to reject the right's adulation of accumulating wealth and power without real justice. Christians in Europe and elsewhere are going back to defining their politics as neither right nor left but *personalist* – which is to say, based on an anthropology which regards the soul, relationality and human dignity as irreducible, in contrast either to a cult of pure individual rights or an outright denial of human dignity altogether. So at no time in the recent past has it more looked as if a distinctly Christian politics were once more emerging, in an echo of the so-called

Christendom politics of the 1930s that laid the foundations for post-war Christian Democracy, even though this can also be a politics that appeals to the adherents of other faiths or to spiritually sensitive secular people.

If identity liberalism is hard to accept, then the traditionalist movement is entirely beyond the pale. Everywhere nationalism can take the form of atavistic religious attachment, and Christians and other religious people must be on guard against the fundamentalist subordination of supernatural faith to immanent identity. Both the secular and the fundamentalist variants of populism practices forms of exclusionary identity politics that are incompatible with religious traditions. Religions have a duty to offer a vision that outflanks both undemocratic secular liberalism and ethno-centric or even neo-fascist fundamentalism.

Thus, religious traditions need something that can combine thick, substantive ties with an international and indeed global outlook. How can a citizen of everywhere *also* be a citizen of somewhere? Arguably, religions are uniquely positioned to cross boundaries in more embodied ways and offer a paradoxical politics beyond the secular logic of left *versus* right. Surely, the most primary bonds and connections between human beings are not confined to national borders. They are transnational inflections of universal human attributes: language, cultural customs, music, art, literary modes and religion. Even with the sharp decline in religious practice and belief, a certain ethos shaped by faith traditions still pervades politics and international relations, and it can once again be nurtured to strengthen interpersonal solidarity.

However, the churches and other religious traditions have to ask themselves just why they have become so often alienated from the people – so little like folk and popular religions that command people's attachment and affection. Many religious institutions speak the secular idiom of progress or reaction, which runs the double risk of either secularising sacred authority or sacralising secular power. Here we need to heed the lessons of recent history. After each of the two world wars, many

Christians allied themselves with either the pagan populism of right-wing authoritarian nationalism (as during the interwar period) or the secular politics of liberalism (as in the post-1945 era). In each case, these ideologies sported the trappings of Christianity but embraced a secularism that weakens the metaphysical foundations of ethics and politics – the pre-political consensus that is questioned now that liberal hegemony has come to an end. Today the popular revolt against liberalism is the *vox populi* that has to a degree, however distorted, spoken as the *vox Dei*. But it is not clear religious authorities have done so too. Instead, the churches often speak in the voice of pseudo-expertise, managerialism and “bland nostrums that perhaps betray a bourgeois compromise with the world that less fortunate people distrust and secretly despise” (John Milbank).

To be fair though, a number of religious leaders have not shied away from speaking truth to power. Take Pope Benedict XVI’s prescient warning about the “dictatorship of relativism that does not recognise anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires”. And his injunction to marry faith with reason in ways that uphold our embodied soul created by God for eternity. Or Pope Francis’ ecclesial vision in *Laudato Si’* to fuse contemplation and Eucharistic celebration with justice and social transformation.

Or the Anglican archbishops Rowan Williams and Justin Welby’s intervention on unjust war and usury. Or indeed the Eastern Orthodox attempts to mobilise government support for the persecuted Oriental Christians and other religious minorities. Binding them together is a commitment to a specifically Christian vision of humanism – the dignity of the person and the common good, which can be defined as an ordering of relationships in a way that holds in balance individual fulfilment with mutual flourishing, based on the dignity and equality of all people.

Such an integral humanism charts an alternative to both liberalism and populist reactions by combining with more virtuous leadership with greater popular participation. The churches are central to this vision. One of their most important tasks is to translate a rich sense of mystery and

theological learning into liturgical and festive practices to which people respond intuitively and which would re-infuse our middle-brow culture with both folk culture and high culture. Similarly, the churches need to be more directly involved in educational and civic activities as well as just economic practices, if they are directly to demonstrate to people how the gospel transforms their everyday existence. Moreover, the churches need to promote a mode of education at every level which re-links knowledge and skills to the spiritual formation of character. I will conclude with these words from Pope Francis during the Jubilee Year of Mercy when he enjoined the Church “[...] to rediscover the richness encompassed by the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. The experience of mercy, indeed, becomes visible in the witness of concrete signs as Jesus himself taught us”.²⁴

Thank you.

²⁴ Pope Francis, Letter to Archbishop Rino Fisichella, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation on the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy, 1st September 2015, available online at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150901_lettera-indulgenza-giubileo-misericordia.html