RESEARCH ARTICLE

HOW POPULISTS USE RELIGION(S). A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON ITALY AND FRANCE

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses how populist radical right parties use religion in their political discourse as a tool to label their identity and target some specific parts of voters. In particular, it considers the cases of the Lega party in Italy and Rassemblement National in France, treated as most similar cases because of their common ideological features (nativism, authoritarianism and populism). Conducting a software-helped qualitative frame analysis of 117 interviews with party representatives released in 2015-2021, this study provides evidence about how these parties act as 'religious political entrepreneurs' and strategically communicate about religion. The empirical analysis confirms that the two cases align to the diffused Islamophobic stances echoed by the constellation of Western populist radical right parties as well as the interaction with the apparently controversial concept of Christian Secularism (Brubaker 2017).

1. Introduction

'God is dead', declared the German philosopher Nietzsche. Despite declining attendance at religious services in Western countries (Pickel 2013, 68–69), we can say that religion (as an issue) is quite evidently alive and kicking, at least in politics (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009; Minkenberg 2018; Forlenza and Turner 2019; Hesová 2019). This is far from being a consensual understanding: many scholars (Cremer 2018;

Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Immerzeel, Jaspers and Lubbers 2013; Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove 2014) testify that the electoral relationship between religion and populist radical right vote is still an unsolved puzzle (Raison du Cleuziou 2014; 2016; Xia 2017). The portrait of populist attitudes towards religion is complicated by the diversity within this family, where the openly homosexual Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch PVV (Partij voor de Vrijheid, Freedom Party) coexists with defenders of the traditional family such as Marion Maréchal and Simone Pillon.

In this article, we propose focusing on how the Populist Radical Right (Mudde 2007) uses religion in political discourse. In particular, we want to examine the commonalities and differences in Lega and Rassemblement National (from now on, RN) religious-related communication. We follow Schwörer and Romero-Vidal (2020) in focusing on the supply side, on the communication of party elites. There are two reasons for the choice of cases: the historical relevance and the electoral side.

The recognition of the literature suggests that, despite the importance of the topic of populism, few studies have focused on its relationship with religion (Apahideanu 2014; Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy 2016; Brubaker 2017). It would be better to say religions: in the context analysed, both Christianity and Islam are useful for targeting the process of "othering" (Giorgi 2021). Christianity represents the in-group religion, the religion of 'us', the 'pure people', while Islam stands for the 'enemy', of 'them, the others' threatening traditions and cultural heritage. Context matters, in a religious landscape and in politics: Italy is still Catholic-oriented (Donovan 2003), both because of the Vatican and the influence of the Church, while France is laïcité-based (Chelini-Pont 2010; Misje 2018). As far as politics is concerned, the *conventio ad excludendum* towards the Front has not definitively ceased after the change of name (even if the party is no longer the devil as it was under Jean-Marie), whereas Lega has been part of the government on several occasions (1994–1995; 2001–2006; 2008–2011; 2018–2019; 2021–).

The examination of these two cases (relevant Western European parties) allows us to pursue a double objective, based on the difference between office-seeking and policy-seeking, and related to the testing and possible refinement of the renewed relevance of religion for contemporary politics. More specifically, we want to unravel the place of religion in the argumentation repertoire of the PRR parties and to clarify how PRR actors incorporate religion into their mobilisation strategies; how they use religion as a resource to empower themselves. We argue that there is room for the political discretion of PRR parties in incorporating religion into their mobilisation strategies. For example, some may use religion as a short-term contextual tie that they engage in order to gain a strategic advantage over their political rivals. There is also a more complex form of use which postulates that religion is used by actors interested in introducing coherent ideas, discourses and policies in a religious key that were not available at the domestic level. In this sense, religion is used legitimisingly, in the sense that entrepreneurial actors in the party are dedicated to producing and legitimising a set of normative ideas. In this case, religion can be used as a coordinating mechanism to communicate with the wider public.

To face this challenge, we adopted a qualitative approach developing a frame analysis of the speeches and interviews that party leaders and other six personalities released from 2015 to 2021. Such a structured focus allows to better grasp the positions they held, as they are relatively easy to understand. The starting point of the timeframe was chosen mainly because of the rise of the terrorist issue, perceived as an Islamic threat, but there is also a political side, considering that both Salvini's and Le Pen's leaderships were sound at that time.

This article is structured as follows: in the first section, we describe the link between religion and PRR parties as discussed in the literature. We then present our hypotheses and the research design, including the selection of cases and data sources. The final section is devoted to the results and concludes with a discussion of their main implications.

2. Populist radical right and religion

Literature on populism is astonishing. Probably there is not even a topic in contemporary social sciences that has been the subject of investigation as often as populism. Nevertheless, the scenario changes when religion is brought onto the stage (Mudde 2007; Yilmaz, Morieson and Demir 2021). And there are two other issues to mention: that both populism and religion are hard to define (Ionescu and Gellner 1969; Durkheim 1915) and that religion is not only about faith and believing, but it is also a matter of immaterial heritage (Reynié 2021). However, something is changing.

Broadly, there are three lines of reflection (Spini 2018): the 'populism hijacking religion' option, popularized by Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy (2016) and nuanced by Giorgi (2021); the civilisation religion-based approach (Brubaker 2017; Yilmaz and Morieson 2021), according to whom religion is a tool for the construction of identity and hence pertains more to the domain of belonging rather than believing; the religious populism proposal[1] (Stavrakakis 2002; Apahideanu 2014; Zúquete 2017).

These three lines share some common features: Apahideanu (2014), in shaping his own version of religious populism, considers it the result of the overlapping of two dimensions, one of which is the use of religious features by politicians (religious politics), in clear continuity with the hijacking hypothesis proposed by Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy (2016) and the identity-driven conceptualisation of religion and populism (DeHanas & Shterin 2018). It is not compulsory for populists to attend the Sunday Mass to portray themselves as defenders of Christianity, engaged in a crusade to defend a faith that is constantly under attack. A caveat is needed. Up to this point, we have been talking about 'pure' populism, but most of the literature addressing the main topic of this article, at least in Western Europe[2], refers to a specific variant of populism, that of right-wing populism (Rydgren 2010; Akkerman, De Lange and Rooduijn 2016; Haynes 2020) or populist radical right (Mudde 2007), which was chosen as an expression for the reasons outlined by Pirro (2015), its widespread diffusion and the clarity warranted by populism's attachment to the core ideological features of the radical right, composed of authoritarianism, nativism and populism (Mudde 2007).

Our last consideration allows us to add some elements to the argument developed: if populism, according to the ideational approach, aims at the dichotomisation (the division 'us', 'pure people', vs 'them', 'corrupt elite'), addressing those who are included in a category or in the other is way harder and depends on what kind of populism is considered. Focusing on populist radical right parties (Amengay and Stockemer 2018), then, implies two orders of enemies: 'them', the broad universe of those that are different from 'us', and the 'others' (Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy 2016). After 9/11, the biggest 'other' for PRR is constituted by Muslim immigrants, conspiring for the Islamisation of the Western world. The populist degradation of Islam can be such that it is not even considered a religion, but a military code and a 'totalitarian ideology' (Betz and Meret 2009, 320).

A 'holy war' is put onto the stage and religion, acting as an agent of social categorisation and making up the in-group and the out-group (Yilmaz and Morieson 2021), is there. Christianity is the religion of the in-group and Islam is that of the out-group. A radical version (Brubaker 2017) suggests that Christianity constitutes

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[1] On the supposed dichotomy between belonging and believing, it is worth to mention Davie and Pace (both in Ammerman 2007). Davie considers them as interrelated dimensions and proposes the expression 'vicarious religion' to refer to the 'notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (at least implicitly) not only understand but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority does'. The Italian sociologist expresses himself in different but not opposite terms, claiming that, where the moral teaching of the Catholic Church maintains a grip, the decline in the authority of sacraments such as confession - and the predilection for immediacy in the relationship with God - changes the very character of religion and its ministers who become 'more and more leaders of a social group and less and less the voice of an eschatological message'.

the core of populist civilisationism, the theoretical device through which Islam can be constructed as an enemy: Western civilisation – note the echo of Huntington's clash of civilisations – would be threatened in its founding values by an illiberal and culturally backward religion that freezes gender relations and the sphere of sexuality. DeHanas and Shterin (2018) point out the paradoxical and almost ironic dimension of an opposition constructed in these terms, since the use of the Christian religion to support the greater liberality of Western societies takes advantage of issues such as sexuality and the vision of gender roles that attract so much criticism on the Church. Apahideanu (2014, 85–86), with specific reference to the context of this article, shows that religious populism there can express as Islamophobic populism (Hafez 2014), composed of the implicit or explicit reference to the native Christian community, invaded by Muslims; the accusation of corruption levelled against the political elites of the EU, held responsible for encouraging immigration from Islamic countries; the support for the restriction of religious rights for Muslims through the prohibition of building mosques or wearing specific garments and the preferential option for the respect of the European Christian roots.

On the same line, Yilmaz *et al.* (2021) deepen the difference between identitarian populism and religious populism: the former separates people on the basis of the (religion-based) civilisations to which they are supposed to belong, but its exponents draw nothing from Christian ethics; in the latter, Christianity opposes not only Islam, but also liberalism and secularism, considered harmful to national sovereignty. Significantly, the RN is placed in the family of identitarian populism, while the Lega in religious populism. The role of religion in 'religionless' PRR politicians is at the centre of the analysis of Brubaker (2017): in outlining the main features of "Christian Secularism", the scholar emphasised that defining the constitutive 'other' in religio-civilisational terms invites a characterisation of the self in the same register. The preoccupation with Islam calls a concern with Christianity.

However, the above theoretical pattern denounces a certain lack of clarity about the explicit meaning of religion in discursive and organisational terms. By highlighting references to party members' statements, the aim is to show what religion actually means to them and to understand the role and intensity of religious mediation for the party's offerings. Identifying the 'religious fringes' within the two parties analysed in this study allows us to achieve two objectives simultaneously: to measure the extent to which the leadership is influenced by these actors, and to identify the strategies they use to overcome other sensitivities and to seek electors. But there is also another defining hypothesis and perspective that we want to test: the role of religion as a "tool" to specify the content of the word "people", the striking dilemma faced by Ochoa-Espejo (2017), among others.

3. Methods and Cases

Front National and Lega Nord have represented some of the most relevant, in a Sartorian (1976) sense, parties in Western European populism in the last thirty years: it is so by looking at power in seats but also at the ability to take positions in national and subnational governments and to defend their stances in the European Parliament. More than thirty years of party life means also that relationship with religion is changed (Ozzano and Bolzonar 2020). In this article, we will refer on last decade, but a recognition of the evolution these two parties had is pointful in addressing how many features changed.

Starting from the French party, three phases can be distinguished: since the origin up to the Mid-90s crisis, the religious heritage of the Front was prominent because of the *nouvelle droite* and the pre-Vatican II catholic fringe led by Bernard Antony (Stockemer 2017). Emphasis on ethical issues, with the refusal of abortion and euthanasia, was in line with the Church (Albertini and Doucet 2013). When Mégret contested Jean-Marie Le Pen's leadership and created his own political party, some of the most relevant Catholics followed him, thus

provoking a decline in the religious afflatus of the Front (DeClair 1999; Davies 2010; Dargent 2016) and, conversely, the rise of the portrait of Islam as a threat (the so-called 'invasion'), while at the beginning there was no reference to Islam whatsoever (Perrineau 2014, 96). Historical results of the 2002 presidential elections strengthened this feature. The beginning of Marine's era, in 2012, took the form of an earthquake (Perrineau 2014, 2017; Mayer 2013, 2017; Bizeul 2020). The aim was the *dédiabolisation* of the party (Roy 2016; Scrinzi 2017): this meant no more references to Christianity in favour of *laïcité* (Almeida 2017) and reframing of Islam(ism) as a doctrine opposed to feminist and Enlightenment values (Bourgeois 2016), but this hardly ties with Portier's claim of a return of France as a Christian nation in French politics (Portier 2020, 255).

On the topic of religion, Lega has three phases too with 9/11 and Salvini's leadership as watershed events (Albertazzi, Giovannini and Seddone 2018). In fact, when Bossi founded the party, he was engaged in a struggle against the Vatican and the hierarchy (the so-called 'vescovoni'), proposing, as an alternative, paganism and a Padanian para-religion (Diamanti 2009; Guolo 2011). Lega reconciled with the Church after 11/9, when it became clear that the 'real' enemy was Islam: Catholicism became an ally, especially when Italian bishops were guided by Ruini (Cavadi 2012; Miccoli 2012). However, the party's emphasis on Christian values at that time was much weaker than after Salvini's took the leadership (Giorgi 2019; Bolzonar 2020; Ozzano 2021). The "Capitano" made a breakthrough in the strategy of his party, radicalizing the discourses on the migration issue, declined in anti-Islamic key (Passarelli 2015; Caiani and Carvalho 2021), and cutting the references to the North in order to extend the party's horizon to the entire 'Italian people' (Ignazi 2018).

Table 1 - Periodization of the parties' religious reference by phases.

Party's phases	Relationship with Christianity	Relationship with Islam
The origins of the Front National	Religious heritage of the *nouvelle droite*; pre-conciliar Catholicism, Maurrasianism; emphasis on ethical issues (abortion and euthanasia)	Opposition to the construction of mosques, biological and cultural-civilisational racism without criticism of Islam
Crisis and success of Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National (1995–2010)	Loosening of religious afflatus; internal schism with a section of Catholics following Mégret	Rise of the salience of the narrative of the threat of Islamic invasion
The *dédiablisation* and the change of name under Marine Le Pen (2012–)	Less references to Christian identity; secularism; positions on ethical issues different from the doctrine of the Catholic Church	Fight against Islamism, judged anti-women, and Islamic fundamentalism, harbinger of attacks
The origins of Lega Nord (1990–2000)	Opposition to the ecclesiastical hierarchy; sympathy for the Lefebvrians; construction of pagan and anti-Christian rituals	Opposition to the construction of mosques

Pillar of Italian Christianity: the religious breakthrough of Lega (2001–2011)	Approach to the positions of the Ruinian CEI; consonance on ethical issues with the Italian episcopate (assisted fertilisation, LGBTQ rights)	Rise of the salience of the narrative of the threat of Islamic invasion
Salvini's leadership and the Nationalist Lega (2012–)	Devotion to the Virgin Mary; opposition to Pope Francis' line on immigration; defence of the 'traditional family'	Opposition to Islam, which is contrary to Italian Christian cultural heritage

Source: Own Elaboration.

We can observe that the trajectories of the two parties about Christianity slightly differ, first and foremost after Salvini and Le Pen took the leadership, whereas there is more common ground in the position about Islam. Then, the expectation is that a convergence is possible only if Islam is the core and references to Christianity are, in a certain way, peripheral. With frame analysis, we aim at clarifying this issue, as well as at grasping commonalities and differences.

3.1 Defining frame analysis and the relation with populism

Frame analysis is the methodological tool chosen to investigate the object of the analysis. We defined frames as 'schemes of interpretation that enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large' (Snow, Rochford, Worden and Benford 1986, 464). Within a constructivist approach, frame analysis aims to investigate the processes by which agents construct meanings (Goffman 1986). As Lindekilde (2014) and Björnehed and Erikson (2018) note, representations of the sets of occurrences experienced by agents need to be plausible and close to the actual experiences, but this also means the possible lack of conceptual clarity (Benford 1997; Vliegenthart and van Zoonen 2011). This is the trade-off for its high versatility. Framing aims to maximise the salience of a selection of aspects of perceived reality, with the goal of 'promoting a particular definition of a problem' (Entman 1993, 52). As for the typology of frames, we went for the three-types described by Snow and Benford (1988): diagnostic (problem), prognostic (possible solution) and motivation (reason).

Gradualism in the study of populism (Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove 2014; Caiani and Graziano 2016) is a very recent trend in social sciences, but it is really helpful for the purpose of the article. It prescribes to look at the rate, the degree of populism in parties and movements, thus allowing to explain populism as a matter of frames (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2017; Tarrow 2013). According to Tarrow, for example, each type of populism, as a reflection of contentious politics, is characterised by a master frame constructed by means of a struggle carried out on behalf of activists, around the construction of meaning (Aslanidis 2018, 444). Throughout the article, the interest is not exclusively in a master frame as described above, but in the analysis of minor frames (Kapetanovic 2020).

3.2 Why compare

In developing this comparison, we have paid particular attention to the Sartorian advice (1991) on how (and how not) to compare, that is, to control. The specification of concepts made in section 2, in line with Rose and Mackenzie (1991), makes it possible to identify what is at stake in the study of two different national contexts.

With regard to the question of generalisability, we preferred to structure a cross-national analysis with two cases because of the complexity of the concepts of populism and religion, while at the same time being aware that we did not want to fall into 'false universalism' (Tillin 2013), which postulates that if something is tested in one country, it is universally applicable. Acknowledging that comparisons always involve the selection of some characteristics, and that there is a trade-off between intension and extension (the Italian scholar referred to this as 'ladders of abstraction'), we have chosen two Western European countries with a strong PRR party and a similar religious heritage. The use of the term 'heritage' should be emphasised: if we look at the contemporary religious scenario in France and Italy, it is indeed different. However, we do not see this as a problem because our conceptualisation of religion is (also) about belonging.

3.3 Hypothesis and research questions

We look at how populists use religion strategically: this means that strategic action (rationale for the goal to be achieved, as Weber suggests) is part of the article's hypothesis. In the context of two highly developed countries that have experienced secularisation (Habermas (2008) spoke of post-secularism as the peculiar feature of Western Europe) but have a Christian heritage, checking whether framing is more positive (our religion/our culture) or adversarial allows to assess if what defines the 'us' is what 'we are not'.

Despite the usual caveats applying to qualitative studies (Gerring 2017; Yin 2017), we opted for this and for binary comparison, given that some weaknesses exist but they can be overcome. Generalizability is commonly associated with the quantitative method but, as Flybvjerg (2016, 219–220) suggests, it is not exclusive to that method. Both parties belong to the same family – the populist radical right one – and the comparison seems to be useful in order to tackle commonalities and differences. Because of the common elements we have mentioned (party family, national and European relevance), the cases are treated as most similar. Given the author's birthplace and the fewer sources available concerning the French case, efforts were made to avoid geographical bias.

3.4 Sources and Materials

Apart from party manifestoes published in the time span (three for the RN, two for the Lega), the analysis is based on the interviews released by the party leaders, Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini, and the other personalities presented in the next section.

In order for the frame analysis to be carried out, it is necessary to refer to texts that display consistency, i.e. that are capable of detecting argumentative mechanisms. Given the political pluralism reflected in the newspapers of the two countries, an attempt has been made to balance the sources – bearing in mind, however, that the interviews tend to be with newspapers and magazines with a political affinity, excluding those circulating the most – caring, at the same time, of religiously-oriented newspapers and magazines (in Italy, Avvenire, La Nuova Bussola Quotidiana and Famiglia Cristiana; in France, La Croix, La Vie and Famille Chrétienne). Furthermore, it should also be noted that, due to the peculiarities of the French electoral system, it is more difficult to find interviews with Marine Le Pen than with Salvini, who also held ministerial posts in the time period considered. The total number of interviews analysed is 116 (+1): 62 with exponents of the Carroccio, 53 with French frontists. Year by year, they are as follows: fifteen in 2015, ten in 2016, twelve in 2017, twenty-two in 2018, twenty-two in 2019, nineteen in 2020, seventeen in 2021. The insertion of (+1) means that an interview was carried out by the author himself and given in September 2021 by a religious political

entrepreneur of the Lega. Attempts were also made to contact other exponents of the two parties but they came to a failure, for different reasons. The interview – which was intended to be unstructured – was conducted in writing at the request of the interviewee. The inclusion of press releases published by Ansa, in Italy, and Agence France-Presse, in France, leads to further considerations: the concise nature of the releases is at the root of greater difficulty in understanding the argumentative mechanisms of the frames.

The eight selected figures (four for each party) are the party leaders, Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini, and six politicians (half coming from the RN, half from the Lega) labelled as 'religious political entrepreneurs'. In this sense, 'political entrepreneur' is linked to the 'norm entrepreneur' described by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998, 889) and to the 'moral entrepreneur' described by Becker (1963). The number of speeches on religious themes in the secondary literature has been used as a key to identify and select the religious political entrepreneurs among those who have a primary role in the parties: Giorgetti, Pillon and Fontana for the Italian party, Maréchal, Bay and Gollnisch for the old Front. Once again, it is better to be open about the limits of the research: in French journalism – and in French political communication in general – it is very uneasy to find biographical references to the dimension of faith and/or believe, whereas in Italy almost every politician claims to be Catholic and speaks openly about his/her faith[2]. Another issue is the abandonment of RN by Marion Maréchal, who followed Zemmour and Reconquête in the 2022 Presidential Elections.

We used qualitative software to develop the frame analysis, opting for NVivo due to its widespread use and immediacy. The main aid provided by the software is the ease with which different segments of text can be ordered and placed under different labels per theme or topic. However, the use of an IT tool should not be mistaken for human arbitrariness: it is up to the researcher to define the keys and group the texts.

For the frame analysis to be carried out, we have designed a personal codebook from Caiani and della Porta (2011): although the two academics, moving from Snow and Benford (1988), have proposed a reasoned fragmentation of the grammatical period, on this occasion we have chosen to focus only on some of the analytical categories proposed, namely, 'subject', 'action', 'object of contention', 'ally or enemy'. The 'action' is constituted by a threefold option, depending on whether one is in the realm of certainty in the present, eventuality in the future, or will, the call for action; the 'object of contention' represents the issue of reference; 'ally or enemy' instead refers to the dichotomisation so dear to populism, in its entirety and not only in the right-wing variant located here in the centre. The grammatical analysis proposed by Caiani and Della Porta (2011) also makes it possible to distinguish the positions of the headwords within the period: this is useful for reconstructing the frames and highlighting their centrality.

4. Findings: constructing the out-group, looking for the Islamic enemy

The analysis of the materials of the research shows that both the Lega and the RN employ a mixture of Christian and secular features, but with different combinations. The main frames are those of Islam, by far the most salient both in a qualitative and a quantitative sense, thus confirming the expectations of the master frame (Benford and Snow 2000); among the minor frames, Christianity and moral issues (the so-called 'non-negotiable values'). The common trait is the identitarian fashion of these elements, used as markers (Cremer 2021), but we can observe that RN is more nuanced in pointing out the enemies, whereas Lega's rhetoric is more direct. About this, the structure of opportunity and the need for the RN to 'dediabolize' act as important features. In addition, we observe that 'religious entrepreneurs', namely Pillon and Maréchal, tend to be more

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[2] To support this, think of last twenty years' Italian prime ministers (Berlusconi, Prodi, Monti, Letta, Renzi, Gentiloni, Conte, Draghi). Each of them has reported to be Catholic. Then, whether they follow or not the doctrine of the Church is not relevant.

radical in their stances than the party leaders, thus highlighting an internal cleavage.

4.1 Islam

Empirical evidence is clear in pointing out that the diagnostic frame, the problem, can be expressed in a word: Islam. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) have argued that Islamophobia is the primary paradigm of the Populist Radical Right. The results of the research show continuity with this reading, since the problematisation of Islam pervades the political discourse of both parties, albeit in different ways: in the RN, the Islamic threat is linguistically connoted as Islamist, while in Italy the main enemy, the problem, is immigration, only secondarily declined as Islamic. This is understandable by referring to the different histories of the migration phenomenon in the two countries.

I do not confuse this totalitarian and deadly ideology with the Islamic faith (Marine Le Pen, ID9).

Respect for women is incompatible with a certain type of Islam: one cannot throw the doors wide open to immigrants of the Islamic religion and then talk about respect for women (Matteo Salvini, ID17).

Salvini's reference to 'a certain type of Islam' may be misleading but the following part of the same interview helps to dispel any doubts. In fact, immediately after drawing a distinction, the Lega leader broadens the discourse to include all 'immigrants of the Islamic religion', deemed, by virtue of their faith, incapable of respecting women. This is particularly significant: the fight for women's rights – distinctive of the Christian West – can be waged without changing the target of attacks, which remains Islam. In literature, Farris (2012) has noted the centrality of women's rights and gender equality to exclusionary populism.

Often, 'Islamic' is the adjective that qualifies another lemma: the most frequent are 'fundamentalism', 'extremism', 'fanaticism', 'subculture', 'law', 'ideology'. In all these cases, the meaning is strongly negative, as ID84 and ID17 show. The concern must be about Islam, because Islam is dangerous: this, in short, is the summary of Salvini's and Marine Le Pen's position. The consequence is the need to adopt a distinct approach to Muslims, considered as such regardless of their actual belief in Allah, their respect for the pillars and their attendance at mosques. With regard to the latter, the stylistic features and the presence of minarets are contested in France (Nicolas Bay, ID78), which, by making the place of worship visible, are seen as harbingers of the installation of 'political Islam'. It follows that Islam can only be tolerated if it is invisible, while the Islamic character of those who come from certain countries is made explicitly visible, in accordance with the civilisation-based approach to religion. In Italy, opposition to the construction of not only mosques but also places of worship for Muslim worshippers is perhaps more fueled than in the French case (Nilsson 2015).

4.2 Christianity

The presence of Christian elements in the discursive construction of the politicians of the two parties often has a purely adversarial function, against Islam (or Islamism); however, when Christianity is involved, it is framed as the 'roots', one of the cornerstones of the national culture and identity, and then it constitutes the main prognostic frame. The reference to the innermost part of the tree, only partially visible yet fundamental for the tree to nourish itself and remain alive, is used by both parties, albeit in different national contexts: Marine Le Pen uses Christian roots as a sign of the historical legacy that led to the Enlightenment and *laïcité* (ID84), while Salvini – and more generally the Lega – uses it in an anti-European fashion, due that the EU "lobby" – here

the copyright is Fontana's (ID31) – has forgotten to be Christian. This last position is consistent with Molle (2019, 151), according to whom the success of populist radical right parties lies in the ability to use 'an adaptive mythology that plays on pre-existing religious norms to stoke fears of a decline of cultural homogeneity and a loss of political and economic power'.

It deserves to be mentioned that, regarding this topic, Marion Maréchal shows a very different position than her aunt, claiming that the role of Christianity was not something that came to an end in the past, but something that connotates France even nowadays.

> *Laïcité is a useful tool against the propaganda claims of some Muslims. However, one must not fall into "laicisme", that is, the religion of laïcité, which would like religion to be kicked out of the entire public sphere. France is a Christian country, of Christian identity, of Christian roots, which for this reason has a heritage, traditions, a religious connotation, particularly Catholic, to which laïcité must not cling* (Marion Maréchal, ID 21).

The declaration of Marion Maréchal could have been released by one of the Lega party members of our research, thus testifying that on Christianity issues Lega is more radical than the Marine-led RN: indeed, neither the leader of the French party nor the other personalities, apart from Maréchal, supports the idea that secularism should be limited. Then, with reference to Maréchal's change of party and the decline of Gollnisch's authority within the party, we expect the visions on Christianity to adapt to the president's position and to decline in terms of framing intensity.

One more time, we have to pay attention to contexts: parties compete for votes. In this sense, we can say that the references to the in-group religion are also intended to be effective for some specific parts of the electorate. In the case of the Lega, the target is the most conservative fringe of Catholics (Lavizzari and Prearo 2018; Guolo 2011; Cavadi 2012). Indeed, appeals to Christianity can target very different and antithetical groups: pro-solidarity positions towards refugees and migrants are a core argument for a relevant part of Catholics, who find their reference in Pope Francis, but do not catch the support (euphemism) of the RN and the Lega (Cremer 2021). On the other side, the RN appeals to the rural and peripheral areas, that of the 'left-behind' of the globalization, where towns are tiny and worried for their safety and their loneliness (Mayer 2016). As for the figure of the Pope, both the parties have testified their preference for Benedict XVI, who emphasised the need to recognise the Christian roots of the European continent, over Francis, charged as guilty of interfering in the political sphere because of his position on the aforementioned issue of migrants (Nicolas Bay, ID88).

4.3 Non-negotiable values

'Non-negotiable values' means all those principles about which a Catholic cannot have doubts[3]. Namely, they include opposition to homosexual marriage and euthanasia, as well as the fight against abortion. In our article, these issues represent all the three types of frames. The problem is the value and cultural drift that homosexual marriage and euthanasia – on abortion, the reasoning is different – would bring with it, while a call for action is given by 'the defence of the defenceless'. In France, the Taubira law – opposed by the *Manif pour tous* – has opened the door to same-sex marriage, while in Italy, the Cirinnà law regulates civil unions between homosexual couples, without any equivalence with heterosexual marriage. Both within the Lega and

[3] Pope Benedict XVI used the same expression, albeit in a broader sense than Ruini, while his successor, Pope Francis, clearly toned it down in an interview published in *Corriere della Sera* (5 March 2014).

the Rassemblement, the leaders' positions on the issue of abortion are more nuanced than those of the 'religious entrepreneurs': This means that personalities such as Marion Maréchal and Simone Pillon, in the two parties, tend to speak more frequently about abortion, expressing their opposition to it, while Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini act as 'firemen'[4]. In the French case, the fracture between aunt and niece, culminated in the candidature of Marion Maréchal with Zemmour in 2022, started around the *Manif*'s squares. Marion Maréchal has indeed physically occupied the issue, through her constant presence at anti-gender mobilizations (Abi-Hassan 2017), while Marine Le Pen always avoided contentious squares, even for strategic purposes (Bourgeois 2016, 175). A position of open support for the *Manif pour tous*, if identified as a group with religious origins and claims, would conflict with the pro-laïcité posture the RN has taken with Marine (Alduy and Wahnich 2015). The French party, in this sense, cannot be tied with the Dutch case of Geert Wilders' PVV, but shows a minimum acceptance of homosexuality significantly higher than the Lega, in accordance with Brubaker (2017). On abortion, Marion Maréchal and Bruno Gollnisch explicitly criticised the leader's reversal of opinion. It has to be mentioned the attempt of frame bridging made by Gollnisch (ID34), who ties abortion, demographic crisis and migration.

As for the RN, Lega's radical fringe on abortion does not include the leader. Namely, Pillon and Fontana are the most prominent voices on this issue, whereas Salvini, asked whether he favoured their position or not, referred that he 'has no intention to review past laws such as abortion and civil unions' (Matteo Salvini, ID18). More commonalities can be seen in stepchild and surrogacy (when practiced by homosexual families): 'The child's interest comes first' is the refrain, with the clear consequence that both Lega and RN have the moral (self-) obligation to stand against these practices (Garbagnoli 2017). It is interesting to note the influence of context on linguistic framing: in France, for example, the term GPA, which stands for 'gestation pour autrui', is used in the political debate, whereas in Italy, opponents, especially Lega and Fratelli d'Italia party members, but not only, prefer the term 'Utero in affitto' ('womb for rent'). A more neutral use of words, however, does not imply a minor emphasis of the opposition to this practice, as evident in these declarations:

> *I stand against the GPA. We are there at the heart of the trading market of human beings. It is a mortal thrift for our society. Human beings are not consumer objects* (Marine Le Pen, ID 104).

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> *The uterus for rent is disgusting, the worst way to instrumentalise a woman by annihilating her body as if she were a human incubator [...] as the incubator another woman whose body will be bombarded with drugs so as not to reject the foetus with which she has no biological link and which is therefore perceived as a tumour* (Simone Pillon, ID29).

Pillon's statement testifies to the intensity of the opposition to surrogacy: the connotation of his 'disgust' is given by a series of dehumanising lemmas: 'instrumentalise' reminds of an object, exactly as the even more violent 'incubator'. Moreover, it is specified that the female body will be forced to undergo pharmacological 'bombardment' and that the foetus is perceived as a 'tumour': something painful, and evil. Hence, Lega's battle acquires the meaning of a clash in defence of women's dignity that every person with a bit of common sense should support (Norocel and Giorgi 2022).

[4] Here is the most famous declaration on the issue of abortion made by Marion Maréchal: 'It is not up to the state to repair women's carelessness' (Marion Maréchal, Le Mouv', 11 October 2012).

5. Conclusions: religion is up but churches are not a PRR place

It is an identification by opposition that of the European PRR parties. At least, this is the case for the two parties studied in this article: the RN and the Lega. On one side the good, on the other the bad; on one side 'us', on the other 'them'. Often, however, a further Manichaean bipartition appears, 'Christians' versus 'Islamists', coherently with Amengay and Stockemer (2018). In doctrine, many authors have shown how Islam is perceived as the 'other' and the 'enemy' (Hafez 2014; Brubaker 2017), functional to the dichotomisation of the world so dear to populists. Our analysis has demonstrated that Roy's provocation about the subservience of Christianity to Islam is not far from reality: both in terms of intensity, salience, frequency and position, Islam as a frame is more dominant than Christianity or any other. In particular, this paper shows that the concept of religion plays a multifaceted role in PRR, acting on different levels. From the ideational side, it specifies the reference to the 'people', labelling 'us' and 'them'. Defining the enclosure of Christians prescinds from doctrinal or faith considerations: belonging over believing. That is consistent with data coming from electoral surveys: both the Lega and the RN have a sub-average support among those who practice the most (ITANES 2019; Dargent 2016; IFOP 2017; Raison du Cleuziou 2016; Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville 2022)[5]. It is worth remembering that the role of religious (mainly Christian) vote is very different in the two countries, and this means also that the strategies used to be elected vary substantially. Religion can be 'hijacked' by populists (Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy 2016), or populists can take on the task of leading the people to salvation and healing redemptive anxieties (Yilmaz and Morieson 2021). Religion, thus, plays a role in any of the three key tenets of the ideational approach to radical right populism (Mudde 2007; Pirro 2015): Manicheism, as expressed above; nativism, shown in the civilisationist view of western society; authoritarianism, about enforcing social hierarchies and norms by preserving a sort of natural order composed of the defence of the traditional values threatened by Muslims/Islamists.

Among the many concepts proposed in literature, Islamophobic populism (Hafez 2014) and Christian secularism (Brubaker 2017) are the ones that best fit what the frame analysis has highlighted.

The explicit discursive reference to the invasion of Europe by Muslim migrants, ubiquitous in the statements of representatives of both parties, as the support for restricting out-group religious rights – whether through the opposition to the veil or the ban on building mosques –, perfectly align with the most part of the features of Islamophobic populism (Hafez 2014). What differs is the role the in-group religion, Christianity, plays: there, the concept of 'Christian secularism' (Brubaker 2017) allows to target the differences in the cases analysed. Indeed, Christian secularism is more inclined to explain the RN case because, under Marine and with the exception of Maréchal, the party's positive religious references are quite marginal, although present in a specific guise, as a historical element that has allowed the promotion of liberal values in a West perhaps no longer Christian, but with a strong Christian heritage (Cremer 2021). In the case of the Lega, on the other hand, the reference to Christianity is not limited to the past: thus, the attack on liberal values is replaced by an attack on Christianity, in line with the traditionalist Christian identitarian populism (Yilmaz *et al.* 2021).

The strategic, and mobilizational, use of religion by the two populist radical right-wing parties analysed, the RN and the Lega, displays little commonalities and more differences. Both use religion as a key to define the in-group and the out-group and consider Christianity as part of the national culture, but the timeframe of religious significance differs: in the discourse of the RN, and in particular that of Marine Le Pen, the main contribution of Christianity consists in having prepared the ground for secularisation; on the other hand, for the Lega, the discovery of Christianity (Catholicism) came late: under Salvini, the Damascus turn which began

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[5] Some scholars described it as a 'religious vaccination effect' against the PRR (Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy 2016; Cremer 2021)

after 9/11 matured with the aim of representing the demands of conservative Italian Catholicism. The sharing of some common struggles (the fight against immigration, Islamic fundamentalism, the defence and promotion of the Christian roots of the European continent) and hostility towards the ecclesiastical hierarchies go hand in hand with even significant divergences on other issues such as the rights of homosexual couples and feminism.

The inclusion of the six so-called religious political entrepreneurs in the frame analysis made it possible to examine not only the leaders' declarations, but also the internal tensions within the two parties and the different permeability of the leaderships: in particular, Pillon, in the Italian case, and Maréchal, in the French one, have on several occasions taken positions that were later denied, or downgraded, by their respective leaders, thus highlighting, however, the legitimizing element of the religious reference in their radical right proposal. The already mentioned spillover from the party made by Maréchal, and Pillon who is not anymore, a MP after the 2022 Italian General Elections, constitute intriguing features to keep focusing on these two cases in the next future.

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