Who Leads Leitkultur?

How Populist Claims about ‘Christian Identity’ Impact Christian-Democrats in Western Europe

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Abstract

A widely shared but understudied characteristic of the rise of right-wing conservative populism (the New Right) is the emphasis on religious-cultural identity of the West. Using phrases like ‘Judeo-Christianity’, ‘Christian values’, or ‘Christian Leitkultur’ a variety of political actors have claimed that religious-cultural identity needs to be safeguarded and enshrined in policy. As this frame is gaining traction, the question arises what this emphasis on the public importance of religion entails for those who tend to see themselves as the guardians of religious-cultural identity. In particular this article focusses on the challenges this development creates for Christian Democratic political actors.

On the one hand the emphasis on the importance of ‘christian traditions’ resonates with the historical position of christian democrats, on the other hand, there are important differences between traditional christian democracy and how the New Right speaks of religion. The main aim of this article is to outline how the rise of the New Right has created a contestation about what it means to represent christian cultural identity.

Keywords

populism – postsecular – Christian democracy – Judeo-Christianity

1 Introduction

"Truth is right-wing. God is a right-winger." This statement by Thierry Baudet, the electorally successful leader of Dutch populist radical right¹ party *Forum voor Democratie* (FvD), fits in a pattern that is widely gaining traction in Western Europe: populist radical-right movements flirt with references to (Judeo-)Christianity and claim to be the defenders of religious-cultural identity in times of immigration and cultural relativism. This article is about how within secular societies such as those of the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and France populist references to religion shape insiders and outsiders.

Although claims about the intimate links between religion and national, ethnic or racial identity have played a part in the discourse of the far-right since its beginnings, the discourse of parties such as *FvD* does not easily fit classical religious-political registers. The varied attributions to 'Christian culture', 'Judeo-Christian tradition' or 'Christian values' as well as their apparent distance from any institutionalized forms of religion have frequently led scholars and journalists to conclude that these references to religion should be seen as opportunism, incoherent rabble-rousing or empty rhetoric, in short, hardly material to be seriously studied. As parties such as *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany, *Front National* in France, *Vlaams Belang* in Belgium and *Partij voor de Vrijheid* and *FvD* in the Netherlands continue to make headway however, this dismissive attitude is starting to make way for a sense of wonder: what to make of this return of religion in political discourse? How does this relate to 'real' religion? If these movements pride themselves on the secular accomplishments of Western culture why do they simultaneously use a religious framework to describe secularity (as opposed to more secular frameworks such as, say, Enlightenment)? What makes populist religion attractive in contemporary secular societies?

In order to provide at least some answers to these questions, this article builds upon the insight by Roy and others by insisting that populist references to religious-cultural identity constitute a more complex and historically significant phenomenon than is often acknowledged.² I expand upon their framework by stating that in order to productively approach and understand these populist claims about religion we need to see it not as a rupture, or as a

1 I use the definition 'populist radical right' coined by Cas Mudde in Mudde 2007: "political parties with a core ideology that is a combination of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism". Mudde 2007, p. 26.

2 Roy 2007, Marzouki/McDonnell/Roy 2016.

'hijacking' of categories but rather as an influential reintroduction of historical identifications in a changed religious cultural context. Using Charles Taylor's notion of the 'social imaginary',³ I argue that populist movements re-use earlier registers of religious-cultural *Leitkultur*. The contemporary postsecular moment, in which both the boundaries between religion and secularity as well as the role of who gets to speak for religion and its place in conceptualizations of shared culture is set adrift, fuels the success of populist religion.

Of course, in order to understand these shifts and continuations in imaginations we need to zoom in on the particular political constellations of each Western European context. For instance, Germany has a completely different history with regards to conservatism, confessional politics and the place of religion in society compared to, say, France. As a result, claims about the 'Judeo-Christian West', though common across Western Europe, play out differently in each of these contexts. *Front National's* decision to speak of 'Judéo-Christianisme' constitutes a specific in French political history, including the trajectory of *laïcité*, the antisemitic roots and constituency of Front National, and its connection to conservative Catholicism. In the Netherlands, for instance, a particular history of state-sanctioned religious pluralism called *verzuiling* (pillarization), a dominant national-religious register which has historically been associated with Calvinism, and a far-right party which, unlike *Front National*, does not have its roots in conservative Catholicism but rather in secular liberalism, the phrase 'Joods-Christelijk' has distinctly different layers we would need to unpack in order to understand what makes these movements successful in rallying electorates behind a religious-cultural framework.

I will limit myself in this article by focusing on the rise of populist religion in the Netherlands. I will situate populist religion in both contemporary and historical wider contexts involving typically Dutch shapes of secularization, pillarization and the backlash against a (presumed) leftist dominance. In particular I will argue that the claims concerning religious-cultural values by the populist radical right arise should at least in part be seen as a continuation of, and a follow-up to, discourse that is traditionally seen as guardians of religious-political discourse, in particular that of the Christian Democrats. Summarizing things a bit too crudely perhaps, my argument is that populist religion is the continuation of confessional politics.

First, I will sketch how the rise of anti-Islam political discourse in the Netherlands went hand in hand with the rise of religious imagery to describe the dominant national cultural identity of the Netherlands. I will subsequently

3 See for an elaborate series of studies on the theory and practices of social imaginaries esp. Alma/Vanheeswijck 2018.

highlight how the scholarly and journalistic reception of these claims have by and large insisted on an image of the populist radical right as an inherently 'empty' form of doing politics. As a result, commentators and scholars tend usually not to place populist references to religion in a larger historical narrative concerning religion and *Leitkultur* in the Netherlands. *Contra* such interpretations which emphasize populism as a disruption of normal ways of doing politics, I will argue that populist religion revisits religious-political registers. I will conclude by providing a hypothesis that populist religion constitutes a continuation of confessional politics in the Netherlands, albeit under post-secular mode.

2 Populist Religion in the Netherlands: a Mix of Secular and Religious Identifications

When religion is mentioned in the histories of the rise of the religious radical right in the Netherlands, it is frequently in association with the staunch criticism of Islam. More particularly, the rise of populist politicians such as Pim Fortuyn, Geert Wilders, and more recently, Thierry Baudet, is brought into direct connection with newcomers who allegedly insist on clinging to their religion in their new secular surroundings. The advent of the religious migrant supposedly generated malcontent in the secular Western-European country of the Netherlands. However, if we take a closer look at the role of religion things are considerably more complex. The populist radical right's discourse on religion shows not a simple secular opposition to the religion of the newcomer, religion rather plays a considerably more important role in the construction of the national self for the populist radical right. In the following section I sketch how, from the rise of the first populist radical right party in the Netherlands in the 21st century, the *Lijst Pim Fortuyn*, religion played an important role.

Pim Fortuyn, in perhaps his most famous work, *De Verweesde Samenleving* (*The Orphaned Society*),⁴ famously argued that Islamic culture is incompatible with "Dutch culture". One of the most famous sayings of Fortuyn would be to call Islamic culture "backwards". A superficial reading of Fortuyn's book would indeed affirm the aforementioned opposition of secular Dutch society and the "outdated value system" of religious newcomers which is "inherently incapable of participating in a secular society".⁵ A closer look however would see that although the secular character of the Netherlands is praised, this does not mean

4 Fortuyn 2002.

5 Fortuyn 2002, p. 123.

a distant attitude towards Christianity. Fortuyn describes this in detail in the chapter “Judeo-Christian humanist culture: our culture?”.⁶ Fortuyn argues that if the Dutch want to keep their famed secular tolerance, it has to be paired with a renewed interest in the religious roots and values needed to safeguard national identity. The very title of the book ‘The Orphaned Society’ points to religion. Dutch society is not only orphaned because it lacks leadership, but also because religion and its caring work have left the Netherlands through dwindling church numbers, the declining influence of religious organizations and its value systems.

After his assassination in 2002, at the hands of an animal rights activist, Pim Fortuyn and his party were destined to go down tumultuously in history as the avant-garde of the populist radical right, specifically for his controversial, yet afterwards widely copied, criticisms of ‘Islamic culture’. In this tumult, his references to religion, and as I will show below, the inspiration Fortuyn explicitly drew from Christian Democratic sources are often left out of consideration.

A similar yet also under-emphasized concern for the religious-cultural backdrop of the ‘native’ population in the Netherlands is shown by Geert Wilders. Wilders’ party, the *Partij van de Vrijheid* (Freedom Party PVV) became the torchbearer of the populist right in the Netherlands after Fortuyn’s demise. Wilders radicalized Fortuyn’s criticism of Islam, and became famous worldwide for his movie about Islam *Fitna*, as well as a series of escalating statements about Islam including the publication of the Danish cartoons in Dutch parliament and the announcement that in his next movie, he would rip pages from the Koran. Again, here a persistent aspect of the PVV’s ideology is its fascination with religion as part of the Dutch self-image. The PVV suggested in 2006 to replace article 1 of the Dutch constitution with an article that outlines the dominance of Judeo-Christian-Humanist *Leitkultur* in the Netherlands. A high-ranking PVV politician boasted after the elections of 2006 that the PVV has become the second-largest Christian party in the Netherlands.⁷ Elsewhere, I have collected a social media analysis of all PVV Tweets which outline that the PVV tweets more about Christianity than any other party in Dutch parliament.⁸ Whereas most references to Judaism aim to show that Islam is inherently antisemitic, the picture is more complex when we zoom in on the references to Christianity. These cover a wide range of notions of cultural identity, including heritage, the religious roots of contemporary Dutch tolerance and the betrayal

6 Fortuyn 2002, pp. 39–49.

7 Bosma 2011.

8 Van den Hemel 2019.

of protestant and catholic churches of national religious-cultural traditions. Notions of personal faith, ritual, dogma are almost completely absent.⁹

For a third example, let us turn to present-day Dutch society, where, besides the PVV, a new party is in the process of taking over the pole position in the populist radical right in the Netherlands. Thierry Baudet and his party *Forum voor Democratie* (FVD) have recently gained considerable traction in public debates and in national, local and provincial elections. Baudet's provocative standpoints about diverse issues such as classical music, architecture, feminism, global warming, and the cultural identity of the Netherlands include a long-standing fascination with Christianity not as "orthodoxy but as orthopraxis"¹⁰. Orthopraxis indicates the rituals, conservation of Christian holidays and symbols rather than dogma or metaphysics. Besides these culturalized fascinations, Baudet has frequently combined embraces of atheism and Christianity. Take, for instance, the following Tweet: "Atheism is a subset of Christianity"¹¹.

This small pantheon of the rise of the populist radical right in the Netherlands and its standpoints on religion show the following outlines. – Religion is associated with national identity, and with a cultural backdrop to this national identity. There is for instance very little references to global Christianity. – Also, the fascination with religion is almost completely void of interest in articles of faith. In the writings of Fortuyn, the Tweets of Wilders or the lectures and books of Baudet, there is little to no references to faith in God, individual dogmas or spirituality. – Finally, mixtures between religious and secular registers are frequent. The religious-cultural national identity that is described by monikers such as 'Christian' or 'Judeo-Christian' combines registers that in the minds of many commentators are separate. This has resulted in a frequent dismissal of such rhetoric as incoherent or paradoxical. After all, who would agree that atheism is a subset of Christianity? Or, that separation of church and state are Judeo-Christian? This apparent incongruity has led to a contemporary lacuna on both the present as well as the history of religious political identifications in the Netherlands. Let me zoom in on this in a next section.

9 Cf. van den Hemel 2019.

10 NRC 2019.

11 Baudet Twitter 2016.

3 Secular Blind Spots

The rise of the populist radical right has been approached with a variety of academic frameworks. Most notably, commentators have appraised the rise of the populist radical right with a framework derived from the registers of Ernesto Laclau.¹² In this framework, populism is not defined by its ideological content (it can be right-wing or left-wing for instance) but rather by its function, its capacity and goal to divide the people and its enemies. One of the ways in which this is done, according to Laclau, is through the work of “floating signifiers”,¹³ these are signifiers that can stand for a wide variety of dismals. The emptiness of these signifiers, the fact that they can stand for practically anything from economic worries, to racism or unease about rapid globalization for instance, is not a bug but rather a feature. The result is a relative downplaying of the content of populist rhetoric. This emphasis on form and a downplaying of content partly explains why populist religion is not seen as a prime subject of research interest. The most important function for populist rhetoric is not to accurately describe a state of affairs, but rather to bring about a partition between the (good) people and its enemies.¹⁴

This downplaying of the content of populist radical right's references to religion is further enhanced by the explicit secular outlook with which scholars approach the rise of the populist radical right. The rise of a movement which speaks of the importance of religion for the national self cannot indicate a return to religion, after all, church numbers are dwindling, the self-identification as secular is strong in Dutch society and the populist radical right's references to religion do not resemble the religion as it is still present in Dutch society. These reactions contain overtones characteristic of an implicit or sometimes explicitly formulated secular outlook. Defined by Casanova as a central modern category that differentiates between the secular and the religious,¹⁵ “the secular” predicates the differentiation of the institutional spheres of “the religious” (ecclesiastical institutions and churches) and “the secular” (state, economy, science, etc.).¹⁶ From this perspective, claims about the interconnections between the secular and the religions cannot be but contradictory. One of the reactions that is frequently heard when populist movements speak of religion is to separate populist rhetoric about Christian roots and Judeo-Christian

12 Laclau 2005.

13 Laclau 2005, p. 43.

14 Laclau 2005, p. 40.

15 Cf. Casanova 2011.

16 Casanova 2011, p. 1050.

culture from “real religion”. Apparently, there is an important difference between the religion that takes place in churches, holy books, rituals and dogma on the one hand and the broad language of culture.

For instance, Stijn van Kessel analyzes the references to religion by the PVV in *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion*.¹⁷ He acknowledges that people like Fortuyn and Wilders reference Judeo-Christian values, but he outright dismisses these references as having anything to do with religion. With regards to Fortuyn for instance, he writes:

Fortuyn evoked an ostensibly liberal heartland, but was, so to speak, intolerant of intolerant minorities. Fortuyn himself was also hardly the embodiment of religious conservatism. For a start, he was openly homosexual, and quite explicit about his rather tempestuous love life.¹⁸

Fortuyn's embrace of liberal values and his sexuality are seen as diametrically opposed to religious identification. He furthermore outlines that “it is highly questionable whether Wilders or any populist party in general, would benefit from campaigning on the basis of an explicitly religious platform. After all, the Netherlands has become increasingly secularized, a phenomenon illustrated by the gradual decline of the Christian Democratic party family.”¹⁹ Fortuyn concludes “in view of the largely secularized nature of Dutch society and the diminished role of religion in Dutch electoral politics, it is unlikely that a religiously inspired discourse would greatly enhance the electoral fortunes of any populist party.”²⁰ In journalism as well as in academia it is not uncommon to see implicit or explicit secular outlooks function as the backdrop of appraisals of the populist radical right's discourse on religion. This emphasis on style and secularity resonates with a deeply felt reaction to the rise of the populist radical right. Populism is well-nigh synonymous with politics of the irrational underbelly. Not based on realistic thoughts, ideology or coherent worldviews the populist radical right aims to stir up polarization with any means. The result of this is an appraisal of the populist radical right which makes a certain amount of sense. After all, intuitively, references to ‘Judeo-Christianity’ seem predominantly oriented towards dividing the good people from its enemies and not towards any form of theological speculation.

¹⁷ Van Kessel 2016.

¹⁸ Van Kessel 2016, p. 65.

¹⁹ Van Kessel 2016, p. 76.

²⁰ Van Kessel 2016, p. 77.

Yet at the same time, the emphasis on form and secularity might result in important questions being left unanswered. For instance: why does it work to refer to religious-cultural frameworks as opposed to others? Why would a particular set of floating signifiers be more felicitous than others? In this case, why would references to religion be favored over, say, more commonly idealized secular frameworks such as liberalism, Enlightenment, or the constitution? Secondly, the emphasis on form and its implicit bias towards populism as transgressive political discourse aimed at the underbelly of the electorate, runs the risk of obscuring continuations with the past. This has its implications for the take on secularity itself as well. What if the confluences between religious-cultural and secular identifications are not as clear-cut as they are often assumed? Whereas in the field of religious studies, a critical stance on secularization narratives and the way in which they have influenced (national) self-identification is a well-known field of research (e.g. Asad, Mahmood, Brown etc.), in the appraisal of the populist radical right such insights are relatively rare. If we take these two caveats in mind – the populist radical right's references to religion might not be so secular and they might not be so form-oriented – a radically different picture starts to emerge.

In the following sections, I would like to unpack these two points further. I will start with highlighting the continuation rather than the disruption of populist radical right religion. In particular, I will argue that the notion of 'social imaginary' is of use to appraise the role of religion in populist radical right discourse. Secondly, I will highlight the not-so-secular status of contemporary Dutch religious-cultural identifications. I will first reflect on how not a secular, not a religious, but rather a postsecular outlook informs the confessional politics of the present.

4 Religious, Secular or Postsecular?

Coincidentally, it was not too long ago that references to religion and non-religion as sides of the same coin were common not just in political parlance but also in the academic study of religion. For instance, famed erstwhile proponent of the secularization thesis Marcel Gauchet, famously coined the phrase that Christianity is the religion that invented its own end.²¹ This association between Christianity and secularity is common also in contemporary analyses, see for instance political theorist Pierre Manent's overview of contemporary political affordances of the West: "If Marcel Gauchet sees in Christianity the

²¹ Gauchet 1999.

religion that made the end of religion possible, it is because Christianity is the only religion that sets the secular sphere free".²² So not just from a historical perspective, the claims by populist radical right about the conflation of religious and secular identifications demand a more complex answer than mere scorn, also from the perspective of contemporary secularization theory the populist radical right's claims warrant a more close-up investigation.

Let us for instance take a short look at some of the core issues at stake in the meandering debate on the postsecular. Although the term has been picked apart to such an extent that any use of it has become well-nigh impossible, some of the fruits of this discussion are relevant for the topic of this article. The famous article by Habermas,²³ with which many of the discussions concerning the postsecular start, outlined that secular societies might have to deal more intimately than is often presumed with the matter of religion. He argued that such postsecular considerations were all the more necessary since the very identity of Western culture is "rooted in Judeo-Christian values". For Habermas, a reckoning with the afterlife of these religious values is a necessary ingredient for a more self-reflexive and coherent position vis-a-vis religion in the West. At the same time, a more critical discussion revolved around this issue in which the notion of the secular itself was the topic of a critical genealogy. Saba Mahmood for instance, identifies secularity as "largely protestant in outline".²⁴

This admittedly imperfect sketch of debates concerning 'the postsecular' serves the goal in this article to outline that a blurring of the lines between the secular and religious is academically relevant and it is not so easy to dismiss claims that secularity and Christianity are intimately connected. It is, of course, ironic to point out that for thinkers such as Saba Mahmood and Talal Asad the conflation between cultural Christianity and quasi-universal secularity function as a warning, and as an impetus to not take claims of secularists at face-value, for the populist-radical rightists as I sketched them above, the postsecular is not a warning against but rather an incentive to insist on Western superiority.

In this sense, we would be amiss to not mention that the most famous pamphlet which outlined, predicted and inspired the clash between 'the West' and 'Islam' also conflates religion and secularity. Samuel Huntington in his "A Clash of Civilizations?" presents the following central quote (which in turn, is a paraphrase of a quote by Bernard Lewis):

22 Manent 2013, p. 27.

23 Habermas 2008.

24 Mahmood 2009, p. 87.

This is no less than a clash of civilizations – the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.²⁵

Whereas the clash of civilizations is often presented as secular, already in Huntington's famous phrasing of this struggle 'Judeo-Christian heritage' is fused with 'our secular present.' If we keep the short discussion of the post-secular in mind, Huntington's claim that secularity and Judeo-Christianity are two sides of the same coin make a certain amount of sense and the populist discourse on these matters sounds less incoherent.

Yet this does not solve the issue. Am I suggesting populist politicians take up postsecular theory? Or am I attributing too much agency to Huntington's text? Instead, what I argue is that postsecular concerns have descended into the social imaginary of Western European societies. The notion of the "social imaginary" coined by Charles Taylor might be of help in unpacking this. Taylor defines a social imaginary as "common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life".²⁶ The social imaginary focusses on "the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings" which is carried in "images, stories and legends".²⁷ According to Taylor, this means that that which was once limited to the realm of social or political theory can be taken up in the everyday way in which people express themselves, situate themselves:

[...] people take up, improvise, or are inducted into new practices. These are made sense of by the new outlook, the one first articulated in the theory; this outlook is the context that gives sense to the practices. Hence the new understanding comes to be accessible to the participants in a way it wasn't before. It begins to define the contours of their world and can eventually come to count as the taken-for-granted shape of things, too obvious to mention.²⁸

Taylor's notion of the social imaginary can help to understand not just what the roots of the discourse of the populist right on religion is but also how and why it succeeds in appealing to people. Religion has become a self-explanatory way to speak of a cultural backdrop, a sense of belonging, the roots of a shared

25 Huntington 1993, p. 32.

26 Taylor 2004, p. 24.

27 Taylor 2004, p. 23.

28 Taylor 2004, p. 29.

sense of 'us' that is now threatened by newcomers. One does not need to have read the social theory that states that the demise of religion breeds a sense of alienation, it has become absorbed in political sentiments.

5 Continuations not Disruptions: Populist Relation to Christian Democracy

The examples I outlined above indicated that Dutch populist claims concerning religion tend to focus on broad cultural identifications rather than confessional identity or dogma. Also, they tend to associate typical secular values and accomplishments with a religious-cultural framework. This has led commentators to state that this has little to do with real religion. In the section above I have argued that it would be more correct to speak not in terms of a clear-cut opposition between religion and secularity but rather in terms of postsecular debates. In this section I want to argue that the statement that this has little to do with actual Christianity is an oversimplification also of the historical role of confessional politics. In fact, conflating religious and secular registers in claiming religious-political identity of the nation has deep roots in Dutch confessional politics.

Let me illustrate this point by referring to the lecture Abraham Kuyper gave in 1873, published in 1874, with the title *Calvinism: Origin and Safeguard of our Constitutional Freedoms*. In these lectures, Abraham Kuyper outlines the idea that constitutional freedoms, like freedom of religion, freedom of expression and separation of church and state arise out of a shared Calvinist identity of all Dutch people. Without safeguarding this national character (*volksaard*), according to Kuyper, the constitutional freedoms will also disappear.

First of all, Kuyper attributes, in a history painted in broad brushstrokes, the development of secular modernity to what he calls the "Calvinistic principle": "The Calvinistic principle, when logically applied, leads to separation of church and state."²⁹ From the Reformation, to the Dutch Revolt, to the Glorious Revolution to the French Revolution, to the American Revolution, practically the entire development of political systems from monarchies to constitutional democracies is attributed to a Calvinist principle:

[the Calvinist principle], contains the first creative utterances of that mighty spirit which started from Geneva, broke out in France, threw from Dutch shoulders the yoke of Spain, in England's troubles unfolded its

²⁹ Kuyper 1895, p. 651.

virile strength, founded America's Union and thus banished despotism, bridled ambition, limited arbitrariness, and gave us our civil liberties.³⁰

For Kuyper, Calvinism is much more than a confession, it has inspired and lives on in an entire worldview. Importantly, this means that in the West, the transfer of political sovereignty from monarchy to the people is stamped by Calvinism and any inhabitant of a state that enjoys civil liberties is thus shaped by and dependent on a Calvinist principle, even if this individual is catholic, socialist or liberal.

It is not my purpose here to critique the historical validity of Kuyper's claims. What I want to outline here is that a monumental figure such as Kuyper, who, according to most major handbooks of the history of Dutch political history, has helped shape the famed model of Dutch pillarization³¹ and has shaped the first political, confessional party of the Netherlands, speaks in terms that are reminiscent of what we have seen above. The broad cultural religious identification, the broad historical narratives and the conflation between religious and secular dimensions. What is more, it shows that this manner of speaking belongs not to the fringes of 21st century radical right discourse, rather to the sources of confessional politics, Christian Democracy, in the Netherlands.

This, at least, is the take Sybrand Buma, leader of the Christian Democrats between 2012 and 2019, has on the rise of populism. In 2016, in the run-up to the 2017 parliamentary elections, Buma published his view on politics in *Tegen het Cynisme: Voor Een Nieuwe Moraal in de Politiek* (*Against Cynicism: A Plea for a New Morality in Politics*) which devotes a large part of the argument to the relation of his party to populism. With amazement, he observed that "Fortuyn is not so much the inheritor of [patriot and liberal] Van der Capellen but more as a follower of Abraham Kuyper."³² He observes that Fortuyn and many so-called populists after him, claim religious culture as a way to "plead for more attention and respect for the core norms and values of our own culture."³³ Isn't this the bread and butter of the Christian Democrats? What had happened?

For decades, in the Netherlands, Christian Democracy was a major conduit for such conservative national identifications. In his *The Struggle with Leviathan*, historian of Christian Democracy Emiel Lamberts outlines how Christian Democracy in many Western European countries has had the

³⁰ Kuyper 1895, p. 660.

³¹ Cf. Lucardie 2002.

³² Buma 2016, p. 72.

³³ Buma 2016, p. 73.

historical task, especially after the Second World War, to bind the (conservative, radical) right to them.

"The power of the Christian-Democrats was dependent on their ability to keep the political [conservative] right permanently tied to them",³⁴ Lamberts outlines, writing at the end of the 1990's, that the future of Christian Democracy will depend on whether Christian values remain a concern: "The future of Christian Democracy depends on whether European society remains concerned with values with at least an implicit Christian basis."³⁵

Now, it can be said that Lamberts' diagnosis of Christian Democracy as a force that binds conservative religious-cultural and confessional identifications provides an accurate entry into the role of confessional politics for a large part of the 20th century. However, as the 21st century and its political upheaval entered the scene, Lamberts' prediction about the future of Christian Democracy as dependent on the concern with values associated with Christianity turns out a bit flawed. The 21st century saw the rise of a movement that precisely claims "values with at least an implicit Christian basis" but at a distance of or even in explicit antagonism with Christian Democracy. If electoral results and the frequency with which Christian values are mentioned are anything to go by, European society indeed remains concerned with values with at least an implicit basis. Yet, these concerns did not find the bedding in the river that is Christian Democracy. Sketching how this works is the aim of this section of the article.

Now both historically as well as more contemporaneously, warnings about the non-self-sufficiency of secularity and the importance of religious-cultural identity was the territory of confessional politics. The example of Kuyper mentioned above for instance is a clear illustration of the historical development in which confessional politics has claimed the stewardship not just of representation of a confessional identity but also of the religious moral of the national community. Importantly, as I indicated above, the early history of Kuyper's politics fused a confessional identification and a conservative religious-cultural identification.

It is not the place here to fully describe the history of Dutch conservatism,³⁶ but the history of Dutch confessional politics is one of well-nigh monopolistic influence interrupted by abrupt decline in popularity. After having been part of all cabinets since the Second World War, the Christian Democrats were ousted from government in the 1990's.

34 Lamberts 1997, p. 475.

35 Lamberts 1997, p. 481.

36 See Kossmann 1981 for a lightly outdated but still impressive overview.

The resulting round of self-reflection amongst the Christian Democrats in the Netherlands gave rise to the following strategic reflections. Buma describes this process as a rediscovery of the roots of Christian Democracy. His Christian Democratic party had to rediscover itself faced with increasingly emptying churches and declining church attendance. In one breath he mentions the leader of the CDA in the turn of the millennium and populist avant-garde politician Pim Fortuyn: “at the beginning of the millennium politicians such as Pim Fortuyn and Jan Peter Balkenende started to critique the ideal of multicultural society.”³⁷ This rediscovery entailed the departure of the CDA as a party pre-occupied with confessional identity: “For the first time the CDA consisted of politicians who thought the discussion of whether you are a catholic, reformed or protestant is completely uninteresting.”³⁸ According to Buma, this meant a departure from being a party that is focused on confession and a turn towards a conservative interpretation of culture. In particular, the Christian Democrat thinkers of the 90’s sought inspiration from the early sources of Christian Democracy like Abraham Kuyper (and other conservative, anti-revolutionary thinkers such as Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer). In particular, Buma outlined that these thinkers stressed the importance of religious values for a diverse society.³⁹ It was these thoughts, according to Buma, that now, in times of declining church numbers and increasing confusion about what binds national communities, needs to be brought to the fore once again. This, Buma stresses, is explicitly not the same as confessional politics in the sense of confessional identity or creed but rather “a shared sentiment of belonging which runs deeper than law or rationality.”⁴⁰

This idealized shared consensus on equality would be expressed in its core when he was asked during the electoral debates in 2017 to provide concrete examples for Christian values: “Well you know, things we’ve had here for thousands of years like equality between man and woman.” This quote has been mocked for being a completely incoherent idealization of culturalized Christianity. After all, not only has Christianity not been in the Netherlands for “thousands of years” but the idea that it would inspire equality between man and woman is ridiculed for being completely a-historical. For our purposes, it is clear that Buma speaks the language of culturalized identity. Also, I would like to point out that Buma’s words resonate with contemporary populist talk of idealizing Western Christian culture for being superior, but it simultaneously reminds us of the grandiose histories that were sketched by Kuyper when he

37 Buma 2016, p. 203.

38 Buma 2016, p. 35.

39 Buma 2016, p. 72.

40 Buma 2016, p. 117.

stated that Calvinism inspired practically all forms of equality all throughout the West.

So, if the CDA has the roots and the discourse, why has religious-cultural identification drifted from the Christian Democrats? The emphasis on religious-cultural identification was seen in the 90's as the reinvention of Christian democracy. What took place that allowed religious-cultural discourse to function at a distance of Christian democratic politics? What happened was that a movement willing to move this idea to more radical and less trodden terrain was more successful in rebranding it. Pim Fortuyn, for instance, explicitly states that he was inspired by Christian democratic emphasis on religious values. He, however, also stated that the Christian Democratic party has squandered its heritage by participating too much in ordinary party politics. Fortuyn, in short, presents himself as the true heir of confessional politics. Now, of course, Fortuyn's account should be seen as participation in rather than a description of a political horizon at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but it remains nonetheless an important insight that there is not only similarity but direct inspiration between the reinvention of Christian democracy and the hijacking of its crown jewels, the religious-cultural values of a national community.

The very same reasons for the need to reboot the ideas of Kuyper and other heirlooms of the Christian democratic tradition explain why this reboot takes place largely outside of the sphere of influence of Christian democrats themselves. Part of the postsecular predicament is that religion has not disappeared but rather that it has returned in new guises and with a less clearly defined set of stakeholders. As the postsecular not only involves speculation about the fusions, mixtures and messy histories of secular identification being predicated upon (religious-cultural) identity, it also involves the historical dissolution of the stewards of religion. It is, with the advent of dwindling church numbers, no longer self-explanatory that the church, or the Christian Democrats, are the sole or even the most logical place to turn to when one is in need of religious-cultural identification. In short, the muddy debates on the postsecular explains how religion returns as a central category in political discourse, but it also explains how it has begun to drift away from those who were traditionally seen as the stewards of religion.

6 Conclusions

As I stated in the introduction to this article, I have limited myself to sketching the Dutch situation. Nonetheless, there are some wider implications of my analysis. One can be gleaned from the reflections on the state of secularity

across Europe. Under the nebulous header of 'the postsecular' a reflection has gone underway in which the position of religion in self-proclaimed secular societies is under renewed scrutiny. Far from being the declining phenomenon it was proclaimed to be, religion has been rendered pluriform. The rise of new forms of spirituality, 'multiple religious belonging' and burgeoning religious pluriformity are hallmarks of these challenges. A result of this is that, to paraphrase a recent report about religion in the Netherlands, religion is not waning, but rather has shifted. The result of this is a vacuum of authority. Who speaks for religion in times of atomized religion?

Counter to secularist understanding of the rise of populism, the populist radical-right's discourse on religion takes place in a time in which religion is not simply on the wane. Rather, its significance has been set adrift. Lamberts' description of Christian democracy as the vessel that holds radical right-wing identifications in check might need to be updated to reflect this postsecular context. Indeed, if confessional politics was the reservoir that had the authority to bind together right-wing and far-right identifications under the header of a *Leitkultur* based on religion, this power has now waned. Christian democrats are no longer the stewards of religious-cultural identification but rather one competitor among many. The question is who leads *Leitkultur*, and which forces precisely fuel felicitous invocations of it. A more precise answer to this remains to be the subject for a larger study.

Biography

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