



## The Relationship Between Religion and Populism: A Review of the Critical Literature

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*Abstract.* We review the literature on the threat of religious populism to the health of liberal democracies today. The literature attributes the presence of populism within liberal democracies to socio-economic conditions, the media, and identity politics. In recent years, growing attention has focused on the role of social media driving the success of populism and not enough time on the variable of the institution of religious fundamentalism impacting interpersonal relationships and social conditioning individuals driving the success of populist movements within liberal democracies. There can be little dispute that religious populism is an area of importance in democracy studies. Yet, there have been few literature reviews on this topic. This paper seeks to identify the literature surrounding this field to help inspire research that would help democracy scholars identify whether or not institutions construct socially conditioned cognitive distortions for individuals and drive the success of populist movements. Further research of the mechanism of religious populism and its impact in shaping perceptions of reality on individuals living within democracies is needed. Understanding the mechanism behind religious populism and its intersections would empower citizens to contribute to a collectively healthy democracy. For the scope of this paper, we will review the relevant intersectional literature on populism and religion, focusing on fundamentalism

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## INTRODUCTION

Populism has evolved into more than a political movement. It is a discourse, an ideology, a lifestyle, and, in many ways, a type of religion. For instance, during the 2016 United States Election, many news outlets such as Fox News centered the Fundamentalist Evangelical vote. There is a distinction between healthy religious institutions and abusive spiritual institutions. Further research is needed in identifying this nuance and understanding the consequence of abusive spirituality in populism's many expressions today. Most populists describe themselves as hardworking, patriotic, and usually, god-fearing people who support the non-establishment elite (Lee, 2006: 358). The literature attributes the presence of populism within liberal democracies to socio-economic conditions, the media, and identity politics. In recent years, growing attention has focused on the role of social media driving the success of populism, failing to consider the variable of religious fundamentalism or social conditioning. Why is it that some Christians support, in spite of their Christian values, morally reprehensible leaders like Trump, and others do not? This paper endeavors to review the relevant intersectional literature regarding the relationship between populism, religion, and rhetoric. Fundamentalism has many expressions, for the scope of this review we will focus on Christian Fundamentalism in the United States. More empirical work is needed to understand the role identity plays in perpetuating the cognitive dissonance of supporting politicians who go against nearly every value of one's faith.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

There is a prolific amount of literature on evangelism, fundamentalism and populism emerging. However, the literature on religious populism is still sparse "and neglected [as an] area of social- scientific research" (Zúquete, 2017: 445). As a result of the overlooked nature of religious populism, it would be remiss not to briefly outline the current literature on populism that fractures off into more niche discussions of religious populism. One strand of the literature hones in on institutions (both church and democracy) to explain the uptick of religious populism. A second strand of the literature believes the politicization of religion and religious identities has driven the success of populism. This camp links populists' collective action and leveraging religious group identity to spread ideology to leverage support for populism. A third strand of the literature focuses on evangelical nationalism, racism, and

leveraging cult mentalities to garner support for populist cults like QAnon. This camp I label as the ‘false idols camp’ of the literature.

### *Overview of the current populism literature*

In the controversial book *Democracy without Shortcuts*, Lafont (2019) covers many topics surrounding the democratic deficits within many presumably democratic countries and the desire for the populace to take back control from the oligarchic elite. She claims that scholarly works such as *The People vs. Democracy* (Mounk 2018) and *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018) convey an existential threat to liberal democracies, the decline of rights, and political decision-making amongst the citizenry but leave out alternatives to fix these problems. There are three points of contention with her work that fracture off to the religious populism literature.

First, she claims many theorists “have quite nasty things to say about citizens” within the contemporary democratic literature and are “routinely characterized as politically ignorant, irrational... and even tribalistic (Lafont, 2019: 7).” Judgmental language like “quite nasty,” constructs a lens that fails to consider why theorists frequently employ value language, not simply provide facts. Theorists can create a lens through language that has political consequences. This lens exacerbates the divide of “elite” versus “patriot,” which enables an environment for religious identity to become salient, as we will discuss in further detail in the next section. Second, Lafont posits that deliberative processes are necessary for strengthening democratic institutions. Third, and tangential to the second point, is that the most significant function of the citizen is the right to legally contest and challenge the constitutionality of policies or legal statutes. Ultimately, judicial review is the most vital factor in achieving a deliberative democracy (Lafont, 2019). The third point in Lafont’s work progresses seamlessly into the discussion surrounding democracy and religion on the debate of secular and religious agents within populist pseudo-democratic projects (Cohen, 2020).

### *Institution of the church*

According to Cohen (2020), Lafont argues that judicial review is imperative for preventing the success of populist movements within democracies and briefly discusses how religion can shape the judicial process. Cohen (2020) takes issue with this interpretation as it overlooks the power of collective action and civil society within democratic institutions today.

In earlier work, Cohen and Arato (2018: 1) outline how populists today “hijack religion for their own purposes” through leveraging civil society to navigate political institutions. They add that “religion can create politicized agendas” and is instrumental in leveraging identity politics (ibid). When populists mobilize religious identities through civil society, it can create damaging effects for liberal society (Cohen & Arato, 2018).

Arato, Cohen and Lafont reference the concept of religious associations and judicial review, which is tangential to the literature on institutions. Another scholar, Müller, has written a prolific amount on the topic of populism which academics frequently draw. He posits the mechanics of religious populism within democratic institutions. Many in the populism literature hold that, institutionally, populism and constitutionalism are not compatible because populists are against institutions (Müller 2017a). Müller (2017b) asserts that populism fosters a “*deranged democracy*” when operating through democratic institutions, slowly eroding them over time. In the chapter Müller (2017a) wrote for the Oxford Handbook of Populism, he argues the contrary, claiming that populists tend to work with constitutional constraints to work in their favor.

Drawing upon the theoretical framework posited by Müller, DeHanas & Shterin (2018) conduct case studies examining the United States, Britain, and Turkey to demonstrate that religion can harm democracy by empowering one type of religious faith and marginalizing another. They also highlighted the role religion played in the populist waves of the three cases is “often overlooked” (ibid). DeHanas & Shterin (2018) identified that scholars of religious populism work under the assumption that democracy is secular. They claim assumptions like this will “prove uncomfortable” to set aside but are imperative to remove in order to expand the literature (ibid).

Djupe forwards much of the empirical work surrounding religious institutions and their impact on politics. In a 2002 study, Djupe and Grant (2002) tested seven hypotheses surrounding the linkage between religious institutions and political participation seeking to identify how churches encourage their members to become more civically engaged. The study found that churches are an efficient way for members to engage in political institutions like voting. An interesting preliminary finding from this study was that churches mobilize their members to participate when church activities have political consequences (Djupe & Grant, 2002). For example, abortion is a single issue that has become so salient that many evangelicals are willing to overlook every other policy a candidate has so long as they are anti-abortion. This study did not consider populism but is one of the first studies to look at religion’s influence

on democracy in the 21st century. Andrew Merton's *Enemies of Choice* could address this oversight.

Merton explores religious social conditioning by fundamentalist faith organizations through the creation of the Pro-life, or right-to-life movement and rhetoric. Merton argues that black and white arguments do not have exceptions, as evidenced in the language of pro-life rhetoric, which reinforces political initiatives like the Pro-life movement. Said differently, "most right-to-life literature presents this notion as fact" (Merton, 1981: 6). Merton hypothesizes that "all [Fundamentalist pro-life supporters] accept, without question, the right of each zygote to develop into an adult human being. Thus it follows that the vast majority of right-to-lifers wish to outlaw not only abortions, but certain birth control methods, notably the intrauterine device..." (Merton, 1981: 2). Merton suggests that the rhetoric of the right-to-life movement was successful due to "its emotional appeals and its disregard of logic (Merton, 1981: 10)." Further, "the right-to-life movement resembles many other oppressive crusades in human history, from the earliest witch hunts to the Spanish Inquisition to the Nazis' persecution of Jews and other Untermenschen (subhuman). All were based on false logic (ibid)." These religious ideologies construct cognitive distortions when situated within the American political landscape. With QAnon growing international appeal, it is imperative to identify the principles of fundamental social conditioning, the myth-making mechanism constructed when spirituality and religious communities have their faith co-opted for power dynamics, and to gain an understanding of how this principle expresses itself in policymaking today.

Kettell & Djupe (2020) conducted a series of surveys to examine the impact of religious arguments on policy debates. The survey contained religious and secular cues designed to detect a bias before and after exposure to the treatments (Kettell & Djupe, 2020). The study found that secular arguments more frequently elicited a positive response, and religious arguments tended to distort political perceptions. They make a significant distinction here that the study showed that these perceptions were not a result of identity but were instead a result of exposure to charged rhetoric and bias stemming from political and religious institutions.

### *Politicized Religion, Collective Action, and Identities*

Some scholars in the identity camp argue that religion is about belonging to a group more than it is a belief for populists (Marzouki et al., 2016). According to Marzouki et al. (2016), religious identities define who can be a part of the group and who cannot, which in turn helps

populists to leverage fundamentalist communities who feel threatened by cleavages such as Islamization for populist political gain. Cohen and Arato (2018) expand upon Marzouki (et al., 2016) by examining religion as a tool to construct a salient cleavage between fundamental Christian populists and the other. They claim that populism “distinguishes religious associations... from the instrumental appropriation of it by populist demagogues” (Arato & Cohen, 2018: 14). When populism combines with the host of religions, it can create an existential threat for constitutional democracy and civil society, which is tantamount to a healthy democracy (Arato & Cohen, 2018). More recent work by Noury & Roland (2020) addresses the rapid expansion of the literature on populism and identity with a focus on Europe. Noury & Roland (2020) connected the rise of populism and nativism to social media and fake news. Their review ultimately found that the existing studies whose independent variables were economic factors tended to confirm that economic causes expedited populism, while surveys tended to show that cultural factors expedited the rise of populism. This review neglected to consider the social aspect of religion.

The majority of this camp believes there is a positive association between religion and populism. In contrast, the new visibility of religion thesis (Hoelzl, 2020) argues that religion is potentially dangerous for populism, but the study of religion and populism needs to examine non-discursive elements of theology in populism. Hoelzl (2020) argues a negative relationship exists between populism and religion. He notes that populist leaders like Donald Trump tend to avoid referencing religious themes or making blatant theological references unless they are desperately pandering. Scholars within the other thread of identity in religious populism often overlook this point.

#### *False Idols: The Language of Evangelical Nationalism, Racism, and QAnon*

The non-discursive nature Hoelzl discusses is significantly understudied in the literature. Arguably discursive rhetoric is more influential because it can mobilize evangelical nationalism and perpetuate racism through rhetoric (Williams & Alexander, 1994). Examining the sign and the signified within the context of political rhetoric could help identify why charged rhetoric charms some individuals in a democracy. Williams and Alexander demonstrate that American populism drew upon religious imagery to gain legitimacy and influence. Deconstructing the mechanism of religious rhetoric is crucial to understand before diving into the False Idols literature. As mentioned above, Merton (1981) examines the ways

in which right-to-lifers employ “emotionally charged rhetoric” when framing the discussion of abortion. The signs of each word trigger an individual to derive meaning, the signified. Religious leaders semiotically create links that evoke emotionally charged accounts, weaponizing signs to manipulate intentions and narratives of the signified. Framing populism in a “prophetic civil religious frame offer[s] populism coherent diagnoses of current societal evils, prescribe[s] a better future for society” allows for populism to gain “cultural resources” and a place within intergroup relations and public debate (Williams & Alexander, 1994: 13).

Online spiritual and conspiracist communities provide a potential venue for respectability and resources to those susceptible to radicalization. In a world where technocrats control resources and status in society, it is tempting for stratified individuals to join these communities. There are incentives to exploit social media platforms with misinformation to weaken existing power structures (Ward & Voas, 2011). Many scholars started to study populist rhetoric after the 2016 US election. Trump’s populist rhetoric during and after the election normalized a nativist discourse which enabled him to leverage nationalist cleavages for his political gain Bonikowski (2019). This rhetoric signals through specific signs known as “dog whistles,” that Trump is complicit in action, whether he consciously admits it or not, of dangerous white supremacists groups who would twist their words and desired perception of reality to fit the preachings of Trump. For example, the QAnon conspiracy cult that arose in 2017 took former Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director James Comey’s tweet on the then trending internet hashtag “#fivejobs I’ve had” where users listed their previous jobs before entering their desired career and turned it into #FiveJihad. Switching the hashtag manipulated the sign to construct a narrative to evoke one of anti-Islamization (Zuckerman, 2019). Some in this vein of the literature believe the rise in support for groups like QAnon is because we have entered “a dark age for information literacy,” leading to a backsliding of accepted wisdom (Hannah, 2021). Others believe that network conspiratorial thinking (Zuckerman, 2019) exploits nationalist cleavages extant throughout liberal democracies in the Western world.

These cleavages are driving the success of right-wing populist parties (Bonikowski, 2019). QAnon’s doctrine is rooted in white supremacy. The conspiracy thrives off of racist and anti-Semitic tropes that have grave offline consequences. Racism is a uniting theme amongst religious populism. Evangelism draws upon symbols like a white Jesus, a white virgin Mary, and never explicitly condemns racism (Weed, 2017). Lamentably, white supremacy within religious populist movements is not a new phenomenon: “race, religion, and temperance often

troubled local manifestations of the movement" during the late 19th century and early 20th-century populist movements in America (Williams & Alexander, 1994: 13)

The false idols vein of the literature needs more robust empirical and intersectional studies. For instance, psychology and religious populism rarely exist within one study. The theoretical frameworks are nearly nonexistent, and empirical research is scarce. A branch of the theology literature researches the psychology of religion to seek and identify the salience of religious ideas and ingroup outgroup dynamics between religious individuals and secular individuals (LaBouff et al., 2012; Preston et al, 2013; Shariff et al., 2016). The study found that priming religion can increase intergroup bias in religious and secular individuals (LaBouff et al., 2012). While this research is not explicitly in the religious populism camp, it does offer transferable insights to help highlight intergroup bias and increasing the salience of racist and religious norms across cultures that could benefit the religious populism literature.

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE LITERATURE

The intersectional literature on religion and populism is siloed in many ways. There is a robust body of literature written in German that is not available in English.<sup>2</sup> A minor constraint, but English translations could help settle the debate around the definition of populism and develop the religious populism literature. The English literature primarily focuses on populist political support garnered through institutions of the church while exploiting the institution of democracy. However, the literature overlooks how these institutions seek to coerce and divide individuals to the will of both populist and liberal elites. The majority of the populist literature touches on the theme of identity. It does not provide enough empirical support to distinguish the causal factors mobilizing populism. More empirical work is necessary to examine the role identity plays in perpetuating the cognitive dissonance of supporting politicians who go against nearly every value of one's faith and perpetuate the rise of populism.

Taking the theoretical framework from much of the ethnic conflict literature could facilitate a more robust understanding of the politicization of religious identities to leverage support for populist values that contradict Christian values at times. There is potentially a similar mechanism normalizing cleavages between religious citizens and secular citizens that enables those who support religious populist movements to rationalize immoral behavior

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<sup>2</sup> See C Landfried 2020, W Lesch 2017, A Mate-Toth 2019, R Faber & F Unger 2008, and Schmidt & Wedell 2002

because a pastor told them to do so. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks from the ethnic conflict literature could expand upon the work of Arato & Cohen (2018).

There is a dire need for academic research surrounding conspiracy groups like QAnon. The QAnon conspiracy is rooted in racism with a cult-like following that has garnered a concerning amount of support. The populism literature discusses charismatic leaders in great detail but understanding the charismatic leaders of the church and how populists borrowed from the fundamental playbook would expand the literature. It would benefit everyone in a democracy to understand the mechanism fostering support for religious populist movements. Further examination of the intertwining of racism, religion, and populist identities is needed. These three factors are incredibly intertwined yet severely understudied. Studying the nature of race, religion, and populism could expand upon the work of Weed (2017) and HoSang & Lowndes (2019) thesis on the racialization of economic power in their work *Producers, Parasites, Patriots*.

Adding to the identity literature and expanding upon gender would also improve the literature. There is a minuscule amount surrounding gender within the religious populism literature. Religion, and fundamentalism, in particular, have the power to construct world views, thinking patterns and create neural pathways in the brain. These patterns can disempower individuals susceptible to populist tendencies by indoctrinating individuals, which disempowers minorities who do not fit the evangelical populist constraints. Religious social conditioning can construct perceptions of reality. How do you awaken an individual to the truth that they have joined something more along the lines of a cult and not just a political movement? The literature should keep this question in mind, with a lens of community compassion not judgement, when informing future studies. Democracy scholars should especially analyze this construction in more detail, specifically studying the influences to the community, the behavior of citizens indoctrinated into black and white thinking patterns versus more flexible thinking patterns, or cognitive distortions, are unable to perceive reality.

## CONCLUSION

The literature on religious populism needs scholarly research immediately. There is a heavy focus surrounding identity politics, discursive strategies employed by politicians to exploit religion, and evangelical nationalism within the religious populism literature. More diverse scholarly research, particularly surrounding race, gender, cognitive distortions

constructed by spiritually abusive fundamentalist communities, and interpersonal relations would improve the literature. Without a coherent understanding of religious populism, it is difficult to highlight how dangerous this phenomenon can be for the health of liberal democracy. Based on the literature above, society keeps having the recurring problem of populism because religion is an institution that informs behavior. A more robust literature could guide decision-makers to enact policies to prevent religious nationalism. Understanding religious populism could help better understand the salience of religion in a secular liberal democracy.

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