

Christianity and the new right in Europe

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Defense of the Christian West? On the ideology of the new right in Europe¹

In many countries, parties of the new right (NR) are having an increasing influence on the political situation in Europe. The Le Pen movement, the Flamenco bloc, the Austrian FPÖ, and most recently the German AfD are calling into question liberal democracy and the peace project of the European Union. These parties have not risen out of nothing; they are emerging as a result of the moral vacuum which the storm of neoliberal ideology has left behind in its wake during the last thirty years. This period has eviscerated the moral substance of both social democratic and Christian democratic parties. In a word, just as Fascism was a reaction to unrestrained liberalism, so the NR is a reaction to neoliberalism.

The situation has been complicated by the massive arrival in Europe of refugees fleeing the turmoil in the Middle

East and the instability of many African countries. Fear of migrants has fed the growth of the NR parties, some of which have won the majority of votes in their countries.

The ideology of the NR movements

Both public opinion and political science place the disparaging label “populist” on these parties. Although this designation has become well established with time, I consider it problematic. The word “populism” suggests, at least in its everyday usage, a non-ideological type of politics which adapts to the changing opinions of the “people.” In other words, the ideology of populism consists precisely in not having any firm ideology. I believe that this diagnosis is a dangerous underestimation of what these NR parties represent.

Many people analyze the phenomenon using psychological categories (resentment against foreigners, anger at the

“established” parties, fear of middle-class decadence, etc.). These movements are sometimes perceived as correctives for the insider-controlled structures of the parties established by democracy: they are considered protest movements without an interest in governing. These analyses are not false, but they often misjudge the ideological worldview that lies behind these movements.

Following Jan-Werner Müller, I perceive in the NR a definite ideology, one that is certainly flexible but also dangerously undermines the principles and values of democracies based on the rule of law, such as those that have been developed in Europe since the Second World War.

The basic conception of this type of ideology first rose in France in the movement organized around Le Pen. Alain de Benoist is the ideologue of the *Nouvelle Droite* who has been most responsible for formulating the movement’s doctrine and differentiating it from the doctrine of the older fascism. The fascist movements that flourished between the world wars were built on two pillars. First, they were openly anti-democratic; their goal was the overthrow of democracy, by violence if necessary. Second, they were founded on racism: the Nazi ideology divided humanity into the lordly race of Aryans and all other races, which were inferior. These inferior races were either to be exploited for their labor or eliminated as worthless human beings. The NR eliminates these two fundamental features of fascism and affirms both democracy and civil rights. It therefore rejects any violent seizure of power and submits to democratic elections. Moreover, it replaces the racism of the old fascist movements with “ethnic pluralism,” which holds that different cultures and ethnicities should be rec-

ognized, but each in its corresponding territory. A key concept of the NR is the preservation of the “ethnic unity” of a nation. Since 1986, the Austrian FPÖ, along with the Le Pen movement, has become one of the most important protagonists of the European NR. Jörg Haider has given very precise expression to the essence of this way of thinking: “If politics is not built on ethnic principles, it holds forth no future for humankind.”

Of course, among the very parties that defend these principles there is much controversy about the meaning and the conception of ethnicity. Alain de Benoist, for example, represents an anti-Christian, decidedly “pagan” view of the French nation. Meanwhile, other groups, such as the FPÖ, have suddenly returned to Christianity, claiming to be defenders of the Christian West in its battle with Islam.

The NR’s proposals and policies are dangerous since their ethnic conception of “nation” or “people” takes priority over human rights. De Benoist speaks precisely of the “ideology of human rights,” and he criticizes it as a secular form of Christian morality. He claims that the three pillars of the French revolution—the ideals of fraternity, liberty, and equality—should be limited to the nation. The NR parties consequently question the universality of human rights.

What is more, they consider that their particular interpretation of “people” or “nation” is the foundation of the nation-state and for that reason should be guaranteed by means of the state. That is why the FPÖ has temporarily promoted as part of its electoral program a “right to a homeland,” which they say should be added to the list of human rights. Such ideas pave the way toward authoritarian politics. In reality, the “right to a homeland”

is in no way a human right that should be imposed by the state's power, nor is it a right that can be judicially demanded. In a pluralist democracy the concepts of "homeland" and "national identity" are the object of public debate; they are concepts that are based on definite human rights, especially the rights to freedom of opinion and freedom of assembly. While the idea of a "human right to a homeland" may appear inoffensive, it contains an extremely dangerous explosive charge which in the long run can undermine democracies based on the rule of law and turn them into authoritarian systems. In fact, Jörg Haider has already proposed the establishment of a "third republic."

It is clear that liberal democracies are founded not only on the universalist principle of human rights but also on a definite consensus about "national identity." Even Habermas, who holds for the legitimacy only of constitutional patriotism, relates the universality of human rights with every democratic system of law, while taking into account particular conceptions of the preservation of national identity. The burning issue for the NR ideologies consists in unilaterally easing, in favor of the nation, the tension between human rights viewed as universal and more particular conceptions of national identity. That is why these parties try to control the media in the name of a popular ideology that weakens the separation of powers: they seek to undermine the independence of the judiciary and especially of the constitutional tribunals that were created in many countries right after the Second World War as a result of the bitter experience with fascism. The constitutional tribunals are institutions of great importance for the protection of democracies and the rule of law.

Accordingly, the NR parties are not populist in the sense that they have adapted to the changing opinions of the people. Rather the contrary: they already know what "the" will of "the" people should be, and above all, they know *who belongs* to the people. Gypsies, Jews, atheists, socialists, and avant-garde artists do not generally form part of the people.

Viktor Orban as Christian protagonist of the NR

These ideologies are not limited to the NR parties; for some time now they have also infiltrated into other parties, especially those of Christian Democracy. An example of this is the Hungarian Christian Democrat Viktor Orban, who in recent years has become one of the most powerful proponents of this ideology. Orban publicly defends the idea of an "a-liberal" state which contains all the aforementioned elements. Moreover, Orban has won two-thirds of the votes in national elections, on the basis of a voter turnout of 53%. By means of a new constitution, Orban has, for the first time in Europe, created a state founded on these principles; he is realizing Haider's dream of installing a "third republic."

In an interview in *Weltwoche* (no. 46, December 2015), Orban expressed quite clearly his ideas about the priority of the nation over human rights:

My personal impression is that, when it comes to spiritual questions, the European elites discuss only superficial, secondary issues. They utter pretty words about human rights, progress, peace, openness, tolerance. There is never any talk in public debates about basic

issues, such as where these nice things come from. We don't talk about freedom, we don't talk about Christianity, we don't talk about the nation, we don't talk about pride. To say it brutally: what prevails today in European public opinion is only a liberal "bla-bla-bla" about issues that are nice, but secondary.

This way of thinking has been applied particularly to the Hungarian constitution, which in its preamble presents Hungary as a Christian nation. To be sure, the preambles of many constitutions present an idealized history of the nation, but Hungary's constitution is different from others in the West: it obliges the constitutional tribunal to make its decisions in light of the preamble, that is, while conceiving Hungary as a Christian nation.

The present refugee crisis throws even more light on the NR ideology embraced by Orban. Democracies based on the rule of law always affirm the basic unity between human rights and the idea of national identity. It is for this reason that the countries of the European Union are vigorously discussing the number of refugees that can be received and the capacity for reception of each country. Despite all the obligations imposed by the right of peoples, there is ample space for considering the legitimate pros and contras. The NR ideologies, however, unilaterally dissolve the tension between national identity and human rights and demand that there be no further reception of refugees. Since in Orban's view the ethnic purity of the "Christian nation" must be preserved,

not even the minimum quota of 1300 refugees is any longer acceptable.

Against the self-proclaimed "defender of the Christian West"

The new defenders of the Christian West are in this way betraying the achievements of the democratic rule of law and the universalist tenor of Christian morality. Against this backdrop it is a paradox of history that Pope Francis, a Latin American inspired by liberation theology, must remind European Christians about the foundations of Western democracies, based on human rights, and also about the core content Christian morality. His discourse in Lampedusa and his call for parishes and monasteries to receive as a minimum one family of refugees has been intuitively grasped by parts of secular Europe as a Christian testimony that is radical and authentic. In contrast, the NR leaders who call themselves defenders of the Christian West publicly insult the pope and even condemn him as a traitor.

Christian churches are still burdened by the heavy legacy of their alliances with the fascist systems of the last century. Renewed complicity with the NR ideologies in these first decades of the 21st century would plunge these churches into a new crisis of credibility whose shadows—we can say with complete certainty—would fall heavily for centuries to come on the lives of Christians in all of Europe.

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1. This paper is an adaptation for the publication SCHELKSHORN, Hans (2016). *Entgrenzungen. Ein europäisch Beitrag zum philosophischen Diskurs über die Moderne*, Weilerwist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2nd edition.
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