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Blandine Chelini-Pont

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THE AMERICAN CATHOLIC RIGHT IN THE MAKING OF U.S. CHRISTIAN POPULISM

AND ITS EUROPEAN INCURSION

Blandine Chelini-Pont

“If I get elected president, [...] Christianity will have power [...]. Because if I’m there, you’re going to have plenty of power. You don’t need anybody else. You’re going to have somebody representing you very, very well. Remember that.”

Donald Trump, Campaign Speech at Dordt College, *The 405 Media*, January 23, 2016

Christian Right populism is not Christian conservatism of yesteryear. It is its nationalist mutation, using Christian identity and confusing it with racial resentment and an America First ideology. It has taken hold of the Republican Party since Donald Trump’s election in 2016. Previously, the Christian reference served to nurture a long political mobilization, partly linked to Catholic actors, that gave birth to the religious right¹, with successful coalitions such as the former Moral Majority, Christian Coalition and Evangelicals and Catholics Together. Newer nationalist and extremist coalitions have taken over the Republican Party and transformed the profile and discourses of many of its candidates, at all electoral levels.

The Christian Right has played a major role in the so-called God gap between Republicans and Democrats. Its role was elevated in 1994 by inclusion of pro-family agendas in the Republican Party's *Contract with America* (the so-called Gingrich Revolution), which helped the Republicans to win the House of Representatives after forty years of Democratic

control. The Republican Party's alliance with the Christian Right continued unabated in the following years and within it the previously unthinkable coalition between conservative Evangelicals and Catholics. Conservative positions contributed to a gradual partial Catholic shifting to the Republican Party, which we have presented in our previous edition.²

The Trumpist Turn

Catholic conservative influence in the Republican Party was strongly represented in the 2012 presidential primaries, by three candidates with such a background: Rick Santorum, Newt Gingrich, and Paul Ryan. In the 2016 primaries, Donald Trump was not at all a good fit for the Catholic conservatives, so much so that, in March 2016, influential Catholic-conservative intellectuals George Weigel and Robert P. George published an appeal in the *National Review* signed by more than thirty Catholic intellectual leaders, who denounced Donald Trump as a man “clearly unfit to be President of the United States.”³ Emphasizing Trump's racist prejudices and highly opportunistic reversal on the abortion issue, the signatories urged responsible Catholics not to vote for him.

Despite this principled stance, many other religious conservatives mobilized for Trump. Phyllis Schlafly, before her death, made her case in her last book, *The Conservative Case for Trump*. Her website published in September 2016, a counter-list of thirty-three Catholic leaders backing candidate Trump, with former candidate Rick Santorum among them⁴. An influential ally, National Catholic Prayer Breakfast's founder Joseph Cella, became the Trump campaign's chief liaison for Catholic affairs during the summer 2016, while Trump surrounded himself with self-declared Catholic advisers, like Steve Bannon, head of *Breitbart News*⁵ website. Among the 2016 members of Trump's Catholic Advisory Council, there was Father

Frank Pavone, a famous anti-abortion activist, who staged a few days before the election his support for the future President, by displaying an aborted foetus on an altar. Pavone headed the *CatholicsforTrump* movement in the 2020 presidential campaign. To this 2016 list, we can add Catholic tycoons like Robert Mercer⁶, former supporter of 2016 candidate Ted Cruz, *Breitbart News*' financier and co-investor with Steve Bannon in *Cambridge Analytica*, a data company later accused of illegal access to millions of Facebook accounts, insidiously influencing opinion in favor of candidate Trump.

With the support of these ardent Catholics and their even larger evangelical counterparts, Donald Trump's rhetoric captured the hearts of Christian voters and seemed to win over most Catholic voters in 2016. Even if he did not repeat this feat in 2020, his single term in office contributed to subvert the identity of the Christian Right, which was co-opted by presidential populism.

National populist / "Christianist" turn

The Christian Right aligned itself with the new ideology it helped forge, because of its support for Donald Trump. Analysts have taken some time to define this ideology, because it creatively combines neo-rightist, anti-liberal economic and international political theses,⁷ carried by intellectuals such as Michael Anton⁸ or Yoram Hanozy⁹, with Christian identity, ancient beliefs about a migrants' invasion and an Islamic threat, combined into a new nationalism. It permitted to gather a common vision of American elites: that they were corrupt, greedy, lawless, and had turned into a kind of globalist mafia; that they would be responsible for the collapse of the nation's traditional heritage and Christian values.

In the first attempts to define this ideological combination, some analysts proposed to call it *National Conservatism* or *National Populism*, some others preferred to label it *Christian*

*Nationalism*¹⁰ or even *Christian Populism*¹¹ or *Christianism*¹². We propose to call it *American Christianism*. Its tone was well set with the help of actors from the Christian Right, including some influential conservative Catholics. They turned Donald Trump into the American providential saviour of all that was great about America, but under threat from leftist institutions and the Deep State.

European Counterpart

Christianist ideology, assembled during the 2016 Trump campaign and revived during the 2020 campaign, seems to have had a parallel development on the other side of the Atlantic. Far-right populist parties and identitarian movements have surged in advocating seemingly similar Christianist ideas, with a strong focus on a perceived Islamic invasion, in a context where a large part of immigrants and refugees from outside the European Union are Muslim. This phenomenon has given rise to abundant academic research since 2016¹³.

Behind this apparent similarity, however, there were differences, which Marie Gayte explains in her article on the place of religion in Donald Trump's populism¹⁴. The dosage of American Christianity was not the same as that of European Christianity, which can be divided at least in two quite distinct groups.

First, there are identitarian movements and parties with a national-populist temperament that use Christianity as an exclusivist cultural compass, to rally voters who oscillate between fear and hatred of Islam. This identity has thus been determined as fundamentally Christian for the last fifteen years, to better reject foreign immigrants and their descendants. Immigrants, who were the first historical target of these parties, have been meanwhile transformed into Muslim enemies¹⁵. Olivier Roy demonstrates in his work on the religious dynamics of the French National Front, how the party, now called National Rally,

instrumentalized Christianity in its politics to build nostalgia for a golden national past and render Islam an intrinsically foreign culture¹⁶. In the United States, Christian populist identity has a more pronounced racial dimension, which holds out the hope of a total halt to Hispanic and other non-white immigration. It captures the fear of white peoples to be no longer the majority. European populist themes of overwhelming Islamization, by demographic and cultural replacement and conflation of Muslims and terrorists, seem not to be so race-focused - although that dimension exists in Christian German populism and the rest of northern Europe¹⁷.

Secondly, not all national-populist parties in Europe have made use of the Christian identity trope, especially when they are sovereigntists and founded by political entrepreneurs¹⁸, as it is the case with the *Independence Party of the United Kingdom*. When they do use the Christian reference, the national-populist parties of Western Europe such as the National Rally in France do not officially defend the traditional family, nor do they call for the disappearance of gay marriage. They accept and defend secularism¹⁹, women's rights and gay rights, as does the Dutch *Party for Freedom*, because of the status of women and gays in much of Islamic beliefs.²⁰ These parties therefore rely on secularism, sexual freedom, and women's rights among their electorates. They say nothing about legalized abortion, whereas such moral and social issues are at the heart of American Christianity.

Then, from a completely different perspective, there are in Central and Eastern Europe reactionary parties and movements, openly national-Catholic or national-orthodox. Their countries have vivid memories of the Ottoman and communist pasts. They see themselves as defenders of their intrinsically Christian people's identity, because they entered civilization, through past conversion, baptism, and Christian coronation of their (tribal) king.²¹ Some of

them have become governing parties, in Poland, Hungary and Croatia. They easily take up the rhetoric of the war of civilizations that has allegedly resumed with the acceptance of immigration and the lack of hard control along the borders of the European Union (EU). European Islamization has been, according to them, confirmed by the growing Islamist terrorism in the continent. And above all, they easily linked Islamization to Western liberalism, which would allow for such a development. Liberalism appears as a system, "imposed" on the peoples of Europe. Furthermore, it would spread a "tyranny" of false liberties and openness²², leading both to economic decline²³ and to domination of cultural pluralism and of the gay lobby's proponents. Voices therefore were raised in these parties to de-liberalize democracy, or even to turn away from it, in favour of an authoritarian regime, Bonaparte-style, which would protect the People-Nation. American Christianity would more closely resemble this reactionary strain, although it does not articulate quite as openly its disdain on liberal democracy and it has no monarchical-authoritarian model to idealize.

Transatlantic connections

Despite these differences, proponents of American Christianity began to transfer their own ideological synthesis into transatlantic networks of conservative Christians, particularly Catholic ones, some of which date back to the Cold War²⁴. A large part of these networks developed in the 1990s²⁵. A more recent part developed under Donald Trump's era, through new groups, counter-media, think tanks, NGOs, ecumenical or Catholic associations, and are largely financed by some wealthy contributors. They have come to represent a counterforce within the EU's civil society, which Carlo Ruzza calls the "conservative uncivil society"²⁶. Steve Bannon and his attempt to regroup a European Christianist "Movement" from Brussels, targeting the European Union in the 2019 European elections, has been the most high-profile

example of this push²⁷, even though Bannon failed and came back to the United States with nothing to show for his efforts.

CATHOLIC CONTRIBUTION TO AMERICAN CHRISTIANISM

Through its theoretical contributions and renewed mobilization, the American Religious Right has supported the new national conservatism, as French American scholar Maya Kandel has called it²⁸, which is heavily tinged with Christian populism. It defined the Trump era, as neo-liberalism represented the Reagan era or neo-conservatism the George W. Bush era. As Maya Kandel writes, this new national conservatism has overthrown the other pillars of old-fashioned conservatism, namely anti-state libertarianism and foreign interventionism. The Christian Right has not suffered at all from this marginalization of traditional conservatism, to the contrary. While after the end of George W. Bush's presidency, many commentators predicted its decline,²⁹ it has found itself at the heart of the neo-national apparatus, as Kevin Phillips predicted fifteen years ago in his essay *American Theocracy, The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century*. The Christian Right gave national populism its Christianist label.

American Christianity as a specific national populism

The term national-populist was coined by sociologist Gino Germani in 1978 in his book *Authoritarianism, Fascism and National Populism*, to define the Latin American regimes of the 1930s through the 1950s (Peronism-Getulism) and their combination of charismatic power, identity mythology and authoritarian state. French historian Jacques Rupnick has also used this expression in his overview of current regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and evoked

a planetary national-populist wave that, from the election of Donald Trump to the White House, to that of Narendra Modi in India, is shaking democracies.

During the 2016 election campaign, Trump's group of populist backers and influencers, including his visionary War of Civilizations strategist Steve Bannon, ostensibly relied on the narrative produced by Christian conservatives since the early 1990s, namely that of a faithful Christian people dispossessed of its democratic sovereignty by liberal, secularist elites open to the four winds of globalization³⁰. According to Philip Gorski, the incorporation of this narrative into Trump campaign communications, in a way, served as a foundational narrative for the national populism that emerged³¹. In their study *Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Elections*, sociologists Andrew L. Whitehead, Samuel L. Perry and Joseph O. Baker have shown that Christian referencing was the most important factor of support in the choice for Trump in 2016³². It functioned, for the first time, as a popular rallying lever, calling for the defense of America's distinctive Christian identity and future. According to Whitehead, it was this set of beliefs and ideal, which constructed at the national level an allegedly unique Christian identity and tended to preserve Christianity as the original national culture. Gorski, on the other hand, speaks of a religious nationalism in a secularized-civil form, which now makes American Christian identity the decisive incubator of national belonging. The result has been a succession of rapid theoretical alignments in a new political synthesis, which takes up the themes of the Religious Right. The alleged immorality of the secularist elites who are destroying Western civilization with their institutional atheism and distorted interpretation of rights and freedoms echoed national-populist denunciation of the elite's conspiracy, sacrificing their homeland on the altar of free markets and mass immigration.

Natural Rights and Christian Religious Freedom

What has been the specific Catholic right's contribution to American Christianity under the Trump presidency, if we can distinguish it?

Many conservative Catholic political leaders and activists provided an important foundation of support for Donald Trump's presidential campaigns and they saw in him the opportunity to elevate conservative moral and social views in the executive branch and especially the judiciary. In doing so, they have embraced the victimization rhetoric of Christian discrimination and liberal Christianophobia by turning them into powerful arguments to denounce what they believe are the false rights imposed on the people by liberals, contrary to the true rights defended by the Constitution, whose inalienability comes from natural law. *Per se*, naturalist position is not "populist" nor "Christianist", and comes from the Catholic Thomistic philosophy. But it becomes so when it is expressed in the name of a constitutional law philosophy. Once in power, the narrative of the constitutional (natural) rights restoration legitimized the freeze or even roll back of legal advances in favour of women's and LGBTQ's sexual and reproductive rights³³. This was particularly obvious in the 2019 rule banning abortion referrals, and requiring coercive anti-abortion counselling for pregnant patients, and imposing stringent financial standards for clinics offering federally funded reproductive healthcare.

Close to this mindset, President Trump led the renewal of the federal judiciary as he promised during his campaign, thanks to the counsel of conservative Catholic Leonard Leo, Vice President of the Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy Studies.³⁴ Leo is credited in some corners as having influenced the Supreme Court nominations of President George W. Bush, and then later of President Donald Trump. Three of these justices are devout and very

conservative Catholics, including most recently appointed Justice Amy Coney Barrett. With Leo's active guidance, President Trump also appointed a quarter of the Seventh Circuit judges, the second most powerful federal court in the country. These judges play a decisive role in any proceedings leading to the Supreme Court. Beyond the federal district, the former president has nominated in the course of three years fifty court of appeal judges, i. e. one in four, almost as many as the fifty-five appointed by Barack Obama in eight years. According to Leo, in his rousing speech at the Federalist Society Convention in November 2019, by the end of his term, Donald Trump would have appointed one-third of the federal courts of appeals judges. In addition, more than 130 District Court judges nominated by Trump now sit on the bench. In total, almost two hundred judges were appointed by President Trump during his single term, many of them social conservatives and members of the *Federalist Society*. To President Trump's critics, he accomplished in just one term in office a kind of social conservative colonization of the judiciary.

The conservative Catholic and evangelical influence during the Trump years extended well beyond the judicial branch. There were leading figures in his administration or advising the president such as Steve Bannon, White House Counsel Pat Cipollone, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, Attorney General William Barr, and entities such as the Catholic Advisory Council, the Evangelical Advisory Council, the expanded Office of Faith and Opportunity Initiative, and various new commissions and directorates where natural rights' philosophy was promoted. At the State Department headed by Mike Pompeo, a Commission on Universal Inalienable Rights was created, who appointed Catholic social conservative law professor Mary Ann Glendon. Within the Department of Health, a new Division of Conscience and Religious Freedom was created in 2018 within the Office of Civil Rights, to monitor the

activity of the latter, whose mission is normally devoted to enforcing laws on discrimination and to ensure equal access for all to health.

The defense of religious freedom during Donald Trump's term enjoyed strong support from conservative Catholics. Although not populist nor Christianist, the definition of religious freedom being promoted was that people of faith have a right to object to laws that violate their conscience and ultimately not be bound by such laws. As defined, this turns religious freedom into a Christian privilege to pick and choose which laws one is compelled to follow. The Department of Justice defended such a view of what religious freedom is. Since Attorney General Barr assumed his post in February 2019, the Justice Department filed statements of interest in many cases involving Catholic and other religious institutions over religious liberty issues. Barr also stirred controversy in his speeches, speaking out from his office, against the "militant" and "growing ascendancy" of secularism and the doctrine of moral relativism³⁵. Barr delivered speeches at Catholic universities and similarly in February 2020 at the National Religious Broadcasters Convention in Tennessee.³⁶ He spoke at the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast at the end of March 2020, where he received an award for his "long history of dedicated public service and his commitment to the defense of the vulnerable religious freedom".³⁷

White Christendom

Demographic changes in the US carry important political implications, and much has been made of President Trump's predominantly white Christian base of support as representing something of a backlash against rising immigration and the steady decline of the white majority population. A 2014 Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) survey indicated that white Christians only represented 29% of the 18-29 age group while they accounted for

67% of Americans 65 and older. The PRRI also found that while in 1991, 87% of US Catholics were white, they are just now 55% while 36% are Hispanic (PRRI 2018). In their November 2016 study, *Explaining Nationalist Political Views: The Case of Donald Trump*, Gallup researchers Jonathan T. Rothwell and Pablo Diego-Rosell showed that racial isolation of whites, as revealed by their zip code, was one of the most reliable predictors of support for Trump. According to exit polls from the Edison Research for the National Election Pool³⁸, Trump did gather a broad white majority coalition in 2016.

Trump tapped into a sense among many white Christians that they were fast becoming a minority in the country their ancestors had founded. White Christian America, which they considered to be the authentic country, the “heartland” in Paul Taggart’s words, was threatened. Identity racism confusing the Christian faith with defense of white survival resulted to support for the Administration’s anti-immigration policies and the President’s stoking of racial tensions that amplified during his term. Trump’s proposed southern border wall with Mexico, for example, received 67% of white evangelical Protestants and 56% of white Catholics approval in March 2019.

Among the defenders of white Christianity, there were some Catholic paleo-conservatives who expanded on Samuel Huntington’s cultural fear in *Who Are We: The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (2005). These paleo-conservatives came into consonance with white grievances, and the rise of what became known as the Alt-Right. This movement, whose name was coined in 2010 by Richard Spencer, former editor of *The American Conservative* magazine and president of the supremacist *National Policy Institute*, had been first anti-Christian. Greg Johnson, one of the Alt Right’s most influential theorists, who held a Ph.D. in philosophy from the Catholic University of America, previously declared

as editor-in-chief of the white nationalist imprint *Counter-Currents Publishing*,³⁹ that Christianity was one of the main causes of white decline through its “racial suicide”. Christianity had become, he said, the religion of Third World immigrants and self-hating whites. While such ideas continue to circulate among neo-pagan racist groups, like the Vinland Wolves in Lynchburg, this anti-Christian paganism is for the most part defunct, since the emerging Alt Right switched to a defense of white Christianity. Richard Spencer in the early 2010s was inspired by the personal evolution of American decline theorist, Samuel T. Francis⁴⁰, former adviser to paleo-conservative and devout Catholic Pat Buchanan, who also wrote extensively on the issue⁴¹. A contributor to conservative publications, editor-in-chief of *The Council of Conservative Citizens'* newsletter *Citizens Informer*, and columnist for *The Occidental Quarterly* published by *The Charles Martel Society* funded by billionaire publisher William Regnery, Samuel Francis denounced Christianity as the enemy of the West and its white race. Francis later came back to his Catholic faith and dreamed of white Christendom's revival⁴². In the same vein, Southern blogger Hunter Wallace (Bradley Dean Griffin), linked to racist *League of the South* and avid reader of Pat Buchanan, has taken up the biblical terminology of God's Nations in his blog *Occidentaldissent.com*, which was essentially devoted to denouncing Jewish power, having allegedly dethroned Christianity as the dominant American culture through a century-long takeover of academia and the media.

Spiritual warfare

Alongside the Catholic Westerners fearing American decline and merging their Christendom dream with that of the white Nation, another intransigent faction of the Catholic right which shares Catholic Westerners' Manichean vision of the political field as the locus of the final spiritual battle, has nurtured American Christianity too. Active intransigents have

loudly oriented their political commitment to Donald Trump in 2016. On July 13, 2017, Father Antonio Spadaro, editor of the Italian Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*, published a particularly incisive article, *Evangelical Fundamentalism and Catholic Integralism in the US: A Surprising Ecumenism*, which described traditionalist Catholics' unexpected connections with the rising dominionist-inspired neo-Pentecostal movements,⁴³ in favor of "an ecumenism of hate" targeted to "apocalyptic geopolitics." Their vision, according to Spadaro, was fuelled by conspiracy and prophetism, similar in their narrative logic to radical Islamism. Integralist activists singled out Pope Francis as the figurehead of globalism's diabolical forces, according to the words of Archbishop Viganò, former nuncio to the United States and prominent protagonist of this faction. According to this narrative, Pope Francis has reached the throne of Peter thanks to occult Masonic, liberal, and even possibly paedophilic networks, which seek the destruction of both the Church and the United States⁴⁴. Such *RadCaths* have set up movements to support Donald Trump during the 2020 presidential elections, through new groups like *CatholicsforTrump*, *CatholicVote* or *The Freedom Club*, and through websites such as *LifeSiteNews*. These groups have almost come to monopolize digital Catholic media.

Their supporters targeted Joe Biden as a fake Catholic and even as an anti-Catholic politician, claiming, like *CatholicVote*, that Biden was "hurting the Bible," and "hurting God," a mantra taken up by President Trump. The founder of this lobby, Brian Burch, accused the Democrats of stirring up a "climate of hate" against Christians and their symbols (statues, churches, etc.). "This is the most Catholic administration we've had in American history, both at a policy level and at a personnel level," Burch told the *Washington Examiner*, citing Trump's support for the "sanctity of life, the family as the foundational social unit, and the necessity of religious liberty."⁴⁵ Messages about the final battle against abortion and for religious freedom have been relentlessly relayed by the *CatholicsforTrump* campaign. It organized zoom sessions,

prayer calls, weekly rosaries, and priestly blessings for Trump's victory. Minnesota-based *Freedom Club* launched an inquisitive website, *anticatholicket.com*. Integralist media figures moved to the partisan front. Father Ed Meeks of Towson, MD, gave a special anti-Biden sermon on YouTube, entitled *Staring into the Abyss*. This sermon, in which Biden was compared to the Antichrist, has been viewed 2.3 million times.⁴⁶ According to integralist youtuber Taylor Marshall, author of *Infiltration, the Plot to Destroy the Church from Within* (2020), the presidential election was truly the final choice for the world, between on one hand Trump and the defenders of the Faith, and on the other hand fake Pope Francis and his apostate acolyte Joe Biden. Former nuncio to the United States Abp. Viganò published a letter to the President on *LifeSiteNews* in June 2020. Viganò described himself unambiguously as the equivalent of Trump and as his ally in the final struggle of the soldiers of Christ against the Deep State and the Deep Church. Catholic soldiers were ready for martyrdom against "globalism, aligned thinking, the New World Order". Trump retweeted his letter with glowing comments, and he reiterated that praise on the influential fundamentalist Catholic network EWTN⁴⁷. In late August 2020, Father James Altman of Wisconsin intoned in a video, that Catholics voting for Democrats must repent or "face the fires of hell".

CHRISTIANIST CONNECTIONS THROUGH CATHOLIC NETWORKS IN EUROPE

In addition to this set of specific characters that Catholic personalities and networks brought to American Christianity, Donald Trump's term in office had also been a time of spreading the Christianist trend to Europe, with the help of various media linked to the American and Canadian radical right,⁴⁸ but also of inter-Christian and Catholic conservative networks.

Despite the abundant literature devoted to the transnational circulation of political ideas from the United States toward Western Europe and *vice versa* - such as studies on the dissemination of neo-liberalism through transnational think tanks such as the *Mont Pelerin Society*- little has been written on transnational conservative networks, and even less so Christian conservative networks. One of the first ones has been the *Center for European Renewal*⁴⁹, which has brought together scholars and intellectuals from across Europe and the US once a year since 2006, and whose mission is to foster “a renewal of Western culture and to promote conservative and Christian thinkers and ideas from Europe, the Americas, and other areas of the world”.⁵⁰ After these first transatlantic Christian/Catholic conservative networks were born in the 1990-2000’s⁵¹, it seems that new Christian/Catholic militant networks followed, tinged with a more populist dimension. They have drawn closer to national-Catholic and national-Orthodox parties of Central and Eastern Europe. Under Donald Trump, they sought to give birth to new identity-grounded parties in Western Europe and to penetrate existing populist parties, reaffirming their religious identity.

Gay lobby and Jewish Plot

Among the first Christian networks formed between the United States and Europe, there were those advocating essential freedoms and natural rights. They worked to defend and implement religious freedom after the USSR’s collapse. Recently, they have fought to have Christian bioethics and natural family written into legislation. They have been devoted to advising civilian movements which sprung up to fight acceptance of homosexuality, through its legal recognition in marriage and parenthood, such as the French federation of Catholic associations *La Manif pour tous*, created in 2013. This federation was able to generate mass protests against legalizing same-sex marriage, but it remained very cautious to not stigmatize

gay and lesbian people and to focus its campaign on the need to protect complementarity between women and men in marriage to procreate and raise children⁵². Nevertheless, other more offensive Christian networks mixed homophobic and anti-feminist preaching, with accusations of feminist and LGBTQ plots to destroy Christian families. They began to denounce the influence of the gay lobby over Christian societies, including up to the Vatican⁵³.

Such has been the case of the *European Center for Law and Justice*, the European branch of the *American Center for Law and Justice*, founded in 1990 by televangelist Pat Robertson, whose mission is to "protect constitutional and religious freedoms". Its current director, French Catholic lawyer Gregor Puppink, has been instrumental in advising and facilitating media debates and appeals to the European Court on end-of-life and gay marriage issues. Author of *Les Droits dénaturés* (Cerf, 2018) and *Objection de conscience et droits de l'homme* (Tequi, 2020), Puppink has taken a new path. The ECLJ officially led a visit of French Catholic associations to Russia in 2014, amid the international crisis provoked by the annexation of Crimea. His delegation was welcomed by the Patriarchate of Moscow, the Russian Parliament, and various ministries. The purpose of that visit was how to defend the traditional family, as this issue was officially resolved in Russia by the vote in June 2013 of a federal law banning "homosexual propaganda". The law was promoted by *United Russia*, Vladimir Putin's party.⁵⁴

The ECLJ's denunciation is linked with that of the US *Center for Law and Justice*, to which ECLJ is subordinated. Its Chief-Counsel Jay Sekulow, who's also the head of the Constitutional Litigation and Advocacy Group and as such served as Donald Trump's lawyer during the first impeachment trial⁵⁵, declared in its 2019 activity report, to be fighting against the "Deep state ... as secret political faction aimed ... to influence national policy." Along with

the ECLJ, Sekulow's ACLJ also funds a special Slavic branch in Europe, the *Slavic Center for Law and Justice*, to develop close ties with Hungarian conservatives and the party of President Vladimir Putin, *United Russia*, in the war against "homosexual propaganda".

In February 2020, the ECLJ also denounced the stranglehold of American billionaire George Soros on the ECHR in a report presented as an exclusive news story by radical right French weekly magazine *Valeurs Actuelles* entitled "NGOs and the Judges of the ECHR"⁵⁶. The report stated that the ECHR judges' recruitment was linked, through NGOs such as *Amnesty International*, to George Soros and his Open Society foundation. American *Fox News's* programs hosted by Bill O'Reilly and Glenn Beck⁵⁷ presented Soros as a "puppet master" who wanted to destroy traditional American values⁵⁸. Soros became the number one public enemy of the American Alt-right. *Vocativ* website counted more than 800 conspiracy theories linked to Soros on internet Alt-Right forums - including Alex Jones' *Infowars* site - during the 2016 campaign and after Donald Trump's election.

In the 2018 midterm elections, President Trump accused Soros of funding protest groups against Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to the Supreme Court⁵⁹. President Trump also accused him of being behind the "migrants' caravan" walking at that time from Central America to the US border. Populist governments in Europe have targeted Soros too since 2015. Born in Hungary, Soros has spent hundreds of million dollars to support democratic NGOs in former communist countries. In 1991, he financed the founding of the Central European University in Budapest, nicknamed "Soros University". At the time of the refugee crisis, Soros sponsored hundreds of associations to assist them and spoke publicly in favor of welcoming them⁶⁰. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orban did not hesitate to label him an "American financier who speculates against the European people". Soros was the subject of a "national

consultation" in his native country, which falsely alleged he was conspiring with the European Commission to bring one million refugees a year into Europe. Eight million Hungarian citizens were sent a questionnaire including questions about Soros' alleged plot. Orban put up posters all over the country showing him smiling, accompanied by the phrase: "Don't let Soros have the last laugh"⁶¹. Since then, Soros has been the subject of incessantly incendiary remarks from Hungarian *Fidesz* party.

Connections to nationalist and new radical parties

Following the example of the ECLJ, other networks developed in the 2010s, ready to provide arguments and slogans to the nationalist parties of the Visegrad group (Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, plus Austria, Croatia and Slovenia) and those of Orthodox Eastern Europe, using the rhetoric of anti-Christian discrimination and pro-gay and anti-family lobbies' manipulation. Thus, the new organization *Agenda Europe*, founded in 2013 in London by some 20 pro-life and anti-SRR (Sexual and Reproductive Rights) leaders and activists, set out to thwart, reverse (and ban) the legalization of abortion and other sexual and reproductive rights. Among the founders of the group,⁶² there were leaders of *the Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe*, the French associations *Manif pour tous* and *Les Survivants*, the transatlantic lobby *Alliance Defending Freedom*. There are also American and Catholic *Live Action*, *Priests for Life*, *Center for Family and Human Rights*,⁶³ *Family Watch International*, European Citizens' Initiatives *Mum, Dad & Kids* and *One of Us*, the Spanish organization *Hatze Oir*, and the Polish organisation *Ordo Juris*,⁶⁴ Italian *Fondazione Novae Terrae*. The heavyweight of this group was the American Brian Brown, President of the US-based *National Organization for Marriage* and of the international NGO, *World Congress of Families*, both flagships of the communication war against the "gay lobby".

Agenda Europe quickly became a go-to point for traditionalist perspectives on sexual and reproductive rights (SRR) but also developed a reputation for its vitriolic language. In 2013 and 2014, various speeches from religious advocates heralded its new blog⁶⁵, as a promising new initiative in the movement to preserve religious authority in the battle for sexual and reproductive rights, called *Restoring the Natural Order: an Agenda for Europe (RNTO)*⁶⁶. Its manifesto asserts that it is necessary to develop an offensive political agenda, “that will hurt their opponents”, to halt and roll back the Cultural Revolution.

In fact, legislative or judicial effectiveness of the members of *Agenda for Europe* since 2014 has been very important, depending on the effective power of national-Catholic or national-Orthodox parties, claiming the non-negotiable character of their country’s Christian identity. Their action has led to numerous restrictions and even blockages on abortion implementation and gay marriage legalization⁶⁷.

The *Agenda Europe* network has accompanied the agenda and personalities of nationalist Christian parties, after having been close to old Christian Democratic parties. Former members of these center-right parties now belong to Agenda Europe, such as Rocco Buttiglione, and Luca Volonté then the President of the largest political group in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the *European People’s Party*. Several Members of the European Parliament also belong to *Agenda Europe*, among them anti-SRR political leaders such as Senator Ronan Mullen from Ireland, and Zejlka Markic, founder of the Croatian nationalist party *Hrast*. Leo van Doesburg, Director of European Affairs of the *European Christian Political Movement (ECPM)*, the new network of national Christian parties across 20 European countries, became a regular *Agenda Europe* participant. Senator Mullen and Markic’s party *Hrast* are themselves affiliated with the ECPM. Paul Moynan, a political

advisor to the European Conservatives and Reformist Party (ECR), attended several Summits. Within European institutions, the Pole Jakob Cornides, an official at the Directorate-General for Trade at the European Commission and legal counsel of *Ordo Juris*, featured as a speaker at the 2014 *Agenda Europe* Summit. Finally, the Slovak Jan Figel, former EU Commissioner, and then EU Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, was a guest speaker at the 2016 Summit. At a ministerial level, *Agenda Europe* was able to attract personalities from Poland such as the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Konrad Szymanski, who spoke at the 2016 Summit, and the Polish Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Aleksander Stepkowski, who was also President of *Ordo Juris* and a regular participant in *Agenda Europe* summits.

Between 2016 and 2018, *Agenda Europe* conducted two opinion campaigns whose slogans were reflected by the national-populist parties of the Visegrad group. First, the anti-“gay lobby” campaign, accusing homosexual culture of destroying the family as a pillar of society and Christianity, and secondly, the associated anti-“gender lobby” campaign, accusing the latter to hide their goal behind the 2011 Istanbul Convention, devoted to eradicating domestic violence against women: this Convention, according to *Agenda Europe’s* network, would in fact be a weapon against the family unit⁶⁸.

With this mantra on the alleged threat posed by the “gay and gender lobbies”, the idea of threats to the family became a slogan of national-populist politicians in Europe. Parallel networks supported and financed the *founding* of new Christian-populist parties, providing them with an ideological framework. British online media outlet, *openDemocracy*, investigated in its *Countering the Radical Right program*⁶⁹ that the new Vox party in Spain, created in December 2013 with among its objectives the repeal of same-sex marriage legislation, was funded by American organizations *Howard Center for Family and Religion and*

*Society*⁷⁰. Vox has also pledged to build walls around Spanish enclaves in North Africa, to imprison Catalan independence leaders, to relax gun control laws, and to make "Spain great again." In Croatia, Zejlka Markic, founding member of the Civic Initiative *in the Name of the Family*, first President of the conservative Croatian party *Hrast* and Vice-President of anti-SRR *Voice of Parents Association*, fiercely campaigned against Istanbul Convention's ratification by Croatia (2017).

The 2019 European campaign against "the Davos party"

Another *openDemocracy* inquiry from March 2019 estimated that over the past decade, American Christian Right networks have spent at least \$50 million to fund anti-EU campaigns and advocacy⁷¹. Among these actions, we can quote the birth of Christian petition platform *CitizenGo*, officially established in Madrid in 2013, by Brian Brown and Ignacio Arsuaga Rato, former member of the American *Phoenix Institute* and founder of the Spanish anti LGBTQ organization *Hazte Oír*, which campaigns against the "gay inquisition". The platform's interfaces are in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian, German, Polish, Russian, Croatian, Hungarian, Dutch, and Slovak. It currently has fifty national sites and dozen of petitions. Although it claims not to accept support from any private or public organization, Russian Orthodox priest Alexey Komov sits on its board of directors. Komov is responsible for the Russian branch of the *World Congress of Families* and President of the *Associazione Culturale Lombardia-Russia*. According to *The Daily Beast*, this association is alleged to have financed the populist *La Lega* (Northern League), thanks to the money from its donor, oligarch Konstantin Malofeev.

Brian Brown has forged enough links with politicians and far-right movements in several European countries, including Italy, Hungary, Poland, Spain, Serbia, Croatia, Moldova,

and Russia, to be able to bring them together in Verona, Italy, in March 2019, during the campaign for elections to the European Parliament for the *13th World Congress of Families*, with Matteo Salvini, then Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary General of the *League*, as keynote speaker. In his address, Salvini described the WCF as a showcase for the "Europe we love." Ed Martin, Republican pundit who co-authored *The Conservative Case for Trump* with Austin Ruse, said at the podium: "The Bible, borders and Brexit will make Europe great again"⁷².

Thus, the 2019 European elections took place as a time of intense connections between the American Religious Right and the national-populist parties of Western Europe, linking their defence of Christian peoples to the destruction of the European Union. The latter is accused of being a globalist club disseminating "false" rights philosophy and favouring uncontrolled emigration. Similarly, the *Beckett Fund for Religious Liberty* contributed in 2011 to the birth in Italy of a Catholic foundation dedicated to the West's survival, the *Dignitatis Humanae Institute*, headed by British citizen Benjamin Harnwell, under the prestigious patronage of Archduke Otto von Hapsburg ⁷³ and the honorary presidency of Cardinal Martino, soon replaced, after his prudent withdrawal, by the very conservative and infamous American cardinal Raymond Burke. The Institute, having apparently started as an elite club for Middle Europa aristocrats defending "the Judeo-Christian foundations of Western civilization," took a political turn when it invited Steve Bannon to its first major event of 2014. Bonds were formed and financial promises (from Bannon) materialized. After Bannon was dismissed by President Trump, he moved to Europe. Then, in Rome, Bannon imagined with Benjamin Harnwell a new kind of missionary school, called the Western Judeo-Christian Academy previewed for 2022 and ruled by the *Dignitatis Humanae Institute*⁷⁴ to educate future populist leaders from Europe. In 2018, Harnwell negotiated – before the agreement

failed in 2019 - with the Italian state a 100,000 dollar, 18-year lease on the magnificent Trisulti Cistercian monastery: American donors promised to fund it, including Steve Bannon himself, who pledged 800,000 dollars.

In addition to this ambitious project, Steve Bannon also founded in July 2018 an association in Brussels called *The Movement*, which hired 10 full-time staff before the European Parliament elections, to foster a great continental alliance of European populisms and lead it to victory in the election⁷⁵. Bannon initially discussed his plans with *The Daily Beast*, saying he wanted to create a "supergroup" bloc that could win up to a third of all 700+ European deputies' seats. He thought of that idea, he said, when he was invited to speak at an event hosted by Marine Le Pen⁷⁶. Bannon believed then that Sweden's 2018 elections created the perfect timing to launch *The Movement*⁷⁷. He repeated to the press a new mantra: he wanted to break up the Davos party - that financial, managerial, and cultural elite that he believed was leading the Western world to its ruin.⁷⁸

Media coverage of Bannon's initiative seemed first to benefit the project. In July 2018, Bannon and other former and current staff members of Donald Trump met with the Prime Minister of Republika Srpska, Željka Cvijanović, in Washington, D.C, although Bosnia was not in the Union.⁷⁹ Bannon attracted attention from Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who spoke positively of the group⁸⁰. In September 2018, it was reported that Italy's Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini had joined Bannon's new Eurosceptic network⁸¹. The *UK Independent Party* stated it would work with the group. *The Movement* has also attracted the attention of Geert Wilders, the famous leader of the Dutch *Party for Freedom*, a Eurosceptic and anti-Islam party. Wilders said he arranged to meet Bannon and discuss the group. Another Dutch contact was Thierry Baudet, the leader of Eurosceptic small party *Forum for Democracy*. It was

reported that French National Rally party (formerly the National Front), led by Marine Le Pen, would also be joining *The Movement*⁸².

This initial period of successes was followed by many disappointments. In September 2018, Luigi Di Maio, leader of the Italian Eurosceptic party *Five Star Movement*, met with Bannon and spoke positively of *The Movement*, without committing to anything. One year later, *The Five Star Movement* formed a pro-European center-left government with the *Democratic Party*. One of the leaders of the *Alternative for Germany* Party, Alexander Gauland, rejected *The Movement* as an American Trojan horse⁸³. The next day, *The Freedom Party of Austria's* Secretary General, Harald Vilimsky, stated, like Gauland's, that his party was independent and unwilling to cooperate with Bannon nor to accept American influence on European populist movements⁸⁴. *The United Kingdom Independent Party's* leader, Gerard Batten, after he stated he would work with the group, had a change of heart in September 2018. UKIP, according to him, "did not fit" into what Bannon was proposing across Europe. It would instead pursue its own specific aims "for the British people".⁸⁵ In October 2018, Marine Le Pen downplayed Bannon's plans for *The Movement*, saying that only European forces could "save Europe"⁸⁶. Steve Bannon was finally declared *persona non grata* by the National Rally.⁸⁷ Last but not least, Polish *Law and Justice* (PiS) MEP Karol Karski, speaking to the *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*, said *The Movement* was not an offer for his party. PiS could never ally with European parties working with Russia, such as the French *National Rally* or the German *Alternative for Germany*.⁸⁸ In January 2019, Michaël Modrikamen, leader of the Belgian *People's Party*, officially registered with the group, but his party was dissolved in June 2019.

The myth of the Empire

Despite his claim that the European elections would prove to be a political earthquake and that the populist parties of all stripes would reach 30% of the vote, Steve Bannon lost his gamble. Nationalist and populist parties scored relatively low in the 2019 European elections and in relative disorder. Steve Bannon failed to federate them, because of their antagonistic and often overblown sense of pride. Furthermore, he and others must overcome for the future the main pitfall of any transnational far right alliance, namely what their Christian identity's demands entail. Bannon's failure indicates that there is not yet a Christianist, European or transatlantic Internationale, despite the obvious amount of energy displayed by US-linked conservative Catholic and Christian networks to set it up.

However, after the 2020 American elections, we do not know yet if Christianity is in a reflux phase or if it is on the verge of a new wave, which can seek to overcome the gap between American and European populisms and create a boomerang effect. Steve Bannon candidly put it when explaining his 2019 attempt: "My theory is that political ideas move like capital markets. That is why I spend so much time in Europe. Trump would not have been elected president without Brexit. It gave momentum. If the populists make more than 30 percent in the (next) European elections, it will give that momentum that will help Trump in the (2020) campaign."

While it is difficult to speculate on the prospects of such an Internationale's effectiveness, we would like to conclude on our hypothesis of a transatlantic Christian populist connection, supported by a powerful American network. It seems that the next re-configuration could reduce American and Eastern European focus on a "homosexual lobby", to target national glorification and the protection of a Judeo-Christian identity. A recent

initiative seems to go in this direction. The Israeli Yoram Hanozy, President of the *Herzl Institute* in Jerusalem, which is dedicated to Zionism promotion and Jewish-Christian friendship, became the new chairman of the American *Edmund Burke Foundation*, originally a Catholic conservative think tank. On February 3 and 4, 2020, this foundation organized a major summit in Rome entitled *National Conservatism*.⁸⁹ This summit brought together prominent figures of right-wing populism around the theme *God, Honor, Country: President Ronald Reagan, Pope John Paul II, and the Freedom of Nations*. Along with the *Edmund Burke Foundation*, this event was co-organized and funded by the Italian *Nazione Futura* (created in 2017), the *Herzl Institute*, the *Danube Institute* (founded in 2013 by a former member of the *National Review* and the *Hudson Institute*), the *International Reagan Thatcher Society*, and other foundations promoting national conservatism such as the *Scottish Edinburgh Foundation*. There were Americans, Britons, Hungarians, Italians, Dutch, Israelis, and French people in attendance. Marion Maréchal, the very Catholic niece of Marine Le Pen and her future challenger, was present at the summit and received a standing ovation for her speech. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was the biggest star, recounting his memories of John Paul II and declaring this pope as the greatest defender of the captive nations of Central Europe at the end of the Cold War⁹⁰.

The hagiographic pretext of Ronald Reagan's relationship with John Paul II allowed for a hybrid narrative of national romance and providential history. The Polish pope and the American president were portrayed as worthy successors to Charlemagne and Leo III, standing up to the Lombardy Barbarians and creating the Empire of Faith, protector of Christian Nations. Images of this providential couple sealing the Empire were contrasted with those of another alleged couple, the EU and Pope Francis, which, instead of playing their role of

potential guardians of Christendom, had become its gravediggers. The cohesive power of this narrative, intersecting with Israeli nationalistic soft power⁹¹, set in motion a new dynamic.

During the spring of 2020, the *Stowarzyszenie Tworców dla Rzeczypospolitej* [Association of Creators for the Republic], a Polish NGO founded by Polish *Law and Justice*, (PiS) party member Zdzisław Krasnodębski, released on social media a *Preamble for the Constitution of a Federation of European Nations*. Advocating for a Confederation of Nation States, this constitutional project relies on an allegedly common Western European culture. That culture would have been “*shaped by various sources, out of which we have to particularly underline the teaching of the Old Testament, Greek thought, Roman State art, the Christian revelation and the heritage of the Romanic, Germanic and Slavic people. It was incarnate in an institutionalised form since the making of Church spiritual sovereignty and the restoration in 800 of imperial political authority.*”⁹² Far from being an exclusively Polish project, the Preamble was drafted by David Engels, a Belgian historian, professor at the Université libre de Bruxelles and, since 2018, at the *Instytut Zachodni* (Western Institute) in Poznań, Poland. Engels’ Preamble for the Constitution of a Federation of European Nations, together with his book *Renovatio Europae* (2019), are part of some renewed attempt to find a common language of all Christian populisms, allied to defeat evil Empires, like the Islamic threat, the European Union and liberalism.

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⁷¹ Claire Provost, Adam Ramsey, « [Trump-linked US Christian Fundamentalists Pour Millions of Dark Money into Europe, Boosting the Far-Right](#)”, *OpenDemocracy*, 27 March 2019. Among them, *American Center for Law and Justice*, *Alliance Defending Freedom*, *Human Life International*, *Acton Institute*, *Focus on the Family*, *Home School Legal Defense Association*, *Population Research Institute*, *American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family, Property*, *International House of Prayer*, *Family Watch International*.

⁷² <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/03/27/anti-lgbt-hate-group-world-congress-families-convene-verona>

⁷³ <http://www.dignitatishumanae.com/index.php/about-us/about-the-institute/>

⁷⁴ [School outside Rome will highlight West's Judeo-Christian roots](#), interview of Benjamin Harnell, EWTN, March 14, 2019.

⁷⁵ Nico Hines, «[Inside Bannon's Plan to Hijack Europe for the Far-Right](#)». *Daily Beast*, July 20, 2018. Peter Stubbley, «[Steve Bannon to set up 'The Movement' foundation to boost far-right across Europe](#)». *The Independent*, July 22, 2018.

⁷⁶ [Steve Bannon plans Brussels-based foundation 'The Movement' for EU far-right](#)". *Deutsche Welle*, July 21, 2018.

⁷⁷ Mark Bendeich; Crispian Balmer, « [Steve Bannon hopes to unite Europe's populists under 'The Movement'](#)», *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 11, 2018.

⁷⁸ Alexandra Bocchi, « [Capitalism versus Tradition in Italy](#)», *First Things*, May 18, 2018.

⁷⁹ K. Krauthamer, Ky ["Ex-Trump Staffers Court Bosnian Serbs"](#). *Transitions Online*, September 7, 2018.

⁸⁰ ["Viktor Orbán Welcomes Steve Bannon's Efforts on Behalf of the European Far Right"](#). *Hungarian Spectrum*. July 30, 2018.

⁸¹ Lorenzo Tondo, ["Italy's Matteo Salvini joins Bannon's European populist group"](#). *The Guardian*, September 8, 2018.

⁸² ["Marine Le Pen's far-right party to join Bannon populist project"](#). *Financial Times*, September 9, 2018.

⁸³ "German far Right rebuffs Steve Bannon's effort to forge Europe-wide populist movement". *The Telegraph*. August 11, 2018.

⁸⁴ ["Austria's far-right unwilling to collaborate with Bannon"](#). *The Times of Israel*, September 12, 2018.

⁸⁵ W. James, ["UKIP will not join Steve Bannon's anti-EU movement, says leader"](#). *Reuters*, September 21, 2018.

⁸⁶ A. Giuffreda, ["Marine Le Pen: Steve Bannon has no part to play in 'saving Europe'"](#). *The Guardia*, October 8, 2018.

⁸⁷ Adam Nossiter, « [Bannon's Populists, once a 'Movement', Keep Him at Arm's Length](#) », *The New York Times*, May 24, 2019.

⁸⁸ P. Siemiński, « [PiS will nicht an Zerschlagung der EU teilnehmen](#) » [PiS does not want to participate in smashing the EU]. *Polskie Radio*, September 27, 2017. Retrieved February 2, 2021.

⁸⁹ <https://nationalconservatism.org/natcon-rome-2020/>

⁹⁰ <https://youtu.be/9WP8xzxH7YY?t=407>

⁹¹ Despite the strong anti-Semitic past and current undertones of nationalist forces such as the Austrian FPÖ or *Alternative for Germany*, not to mention anti-Semitic reactivation of Christian-racist groups of the European Alt-right such as German PEDIGA, in May 2020, German AFD (Alternative for Germany) released a poster quoting the son of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, calling for “the return of a free, democratic and Christian Europe” and declaring the Union an enemy of Israel.

⁹² <https://www.davidengels.be/preamble>