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# Similar yet not the Same: Right-Wing Populist Parties' Stances on Religion in Germany and the Netherlands

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## Abstract

Applying a qualitative framing analysis, this paper examines narratives of the right-wing populist parties Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands on religion. The paper argues that references of these populist parties to religion can be interpreted against the background of specific national context factors such as the respective history of nation building, the traditional role of religion in society and secularization processes. A rigorous examination of parliamentary documents published between 2017 and 2019 shows that whereas the PVV clearly defines Christianity in civilizational and not religious terms, the AfD takes a less clear-cut stance toward the religion framing it both as culture and faith. We contend that this difference can be explained by the lower degree of secularization and the greater role of Christianity as a collective identity marker in post-war Germany.

## Introduction

In recent years, research on populism and religion has skyrocketed with Western Europe receiving particular attention. The edited volume “Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion” of Marzouki et al. (2016) is a prominent example. The contributors maintain that right-wing populist parties in Europe refer to religion(s) for strategic reasons to construct a positive “Christian” or “Judeo-Christian self” that is contrasted with an alien and dangerous “Islamic other”. In a similar vein, Brubaker (2017) observes that Western European populists embrace Christianity in “civilizational” rather than “religious” terms. While Brubaker primarily creates a general perspective, assessing the relationship between populism and religion in Europe as a whole, he also provides starting points for a comparative perspective when describing two different European “country clusters”. In this context, Brubaker (2017, 1193) argues that in countries such as the Netherlands, populists refer to an “identitarian ‘Christianism’” that is characterized by “a secularist posture,

a philosemitic stance, and an ostensibly liberal defense of gender equality, gay rights, and freedom of speech” whereas populists in other countries such as Germany have “not sought consistently to frame its anti-Muslimism in ‘liberal’ terms”. Brubaker acknowledges that his assessment on the German Alternative for Germany (AfD) is tentative, given the then recent foundation of the party; yet even leaving this point aside, the article provides little evidence that can account for these cross-national differences. Overall, most studies on populism and religion have been rather explorative in nature, which is understandable given the novelty of the subject.

This article then intends to take the next step, by rigorously examining parliamentary documents on how populist actors refer to religion. In doing so, we provide an extensive empirical study that is able to draw a more nuanced picture of the relationship between populism and religion. Moreover, we provide suggestions regarding possible explanatory factors in how populist actors use religious and secular narratives in particular national settings. In this article, we apply a comparative perspective assessing how the German AfD and the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) refer to Islam, Christianity, and to a lesser extent Judaism, in order to carve out inter-party parallels and differences, and suggest preliminary interpretations of (country-specific) relations between populism and religion. We contend that specific national context factors such as the history of nation-building, the traditional role of religion in society, and the degree of secularization deserve closer scrutiny as they provide a convincing explanation for national particularities as well as subtle cross-national variations. While we acknowledge that other factors, such as intra-party specifics and national political systems, should not be ignored, the suggested context factors deserve particular attention as they help explain how the references used by the populist parties resonate with the domestic audience.

As a methodology, this article applies a qualitative framing analysis to examine parliamentary records, including plenary sessions, inquiries, and motions. The time-frame is set from October 2017, the moment the AfD first entered the Bundestag, until the end of 2019. This time period provides us with the opportunity to assess and compare the speeches and actions of the two parties in parliament from the moment that both parties were simultaneously seated in their respective national parliaments for more than half the time of their four-year legislative term. This allows for a meticulous assessment of the contributions of both populist parties over a substantial period of time. The timing corresponds with the aftermath of the European “refugee crisis”, when issues related to migration were still highly salient. This fact can explain the frequent contributions of AfD and PVV parliamentarians on matters related to society and identity. It is likely that the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic that struck Europe in the winter of 2020 pushed matters surrounding identity and religion more to the sidelines.

In the article, we contend that the discourse of AfD and PVV MPs shows several similarities. Both parties convey a narrative of Islam, maintaining that it is hostile, alien, and overall incompatible with domestic society. Christianity, on the other hand, is viewed favorably and as part of the nation. However, a closer look shows that Christianity is framed differently. Whereas the PVV primarily refers to Christianity as the source of secularism, that is the idea of separating state and religion, akin to what Brubaker has referred to as “Christianism”, the AfD’s discourse

on Christianity is more mixed. At times MPs anxiously vow to Christian values and symbols, while on other occasions professing a remarkably similar message as the PVV when speaking of Christian traditions and the Christian religion as a source of secularism and state-church separation. AfD references of Christianity thus present an interesting case. We argue that an overall lower degree of secularization and the important role of Christianity as an identity marker in Germany can account for why AfD MPs have taken a less clear-cut stance toward the religion compared to their Dutch counterparts.

The article is structured as follows: First, the term of populism is discussed against the backdrop of possible connections between populism and (references to) religion. While the key debate, whether populists refer to religion out of conviction, or for mere strategic reasons is fascinating and worth studying, it does not present the centerpiece of this paper. Instead, the objective of presenting the state of the art is to illustrate how and where this research ties in. In the subsequent section, the relevant context factors in Germany and the Netherlands are presented before introducing the AfD and PVV as populist parties and turning to the following section in which an in-depth empirical analysis of the parties' references to religion(s) is given. The penultimate section then links the results of the analysis to the specific national context factors, where the latter are applied to provide an explanation for national particularities and cross-national divergencies. Lastly, the final section discusses other explanations for variations in religious references before drawing the main conclusions of the article and making future research suggestions.

### Research on Populism, Religion, and Collective Identities: State of The Art

Concepts of populism mostly refer to a “discursive antagonism between an ‘authentic’ people and a nefarious elite” (Ostiguy 2017, 92). In this context, populist actors are anxious to present themselves as the only true representatives of the people and independent from the elite that, in their view, considers minority interests at the expense of the larger population (Weyland 2017). Since the latter is defined as a homogenous entity, populist actors often support a nativist worldview that is strongly opposed to the idea of multiculturalism and rejects immigration (Mudde 2017). Furthermore, to defend their idea of the homogeneity of the “own people”, populists try to create (national) collective identities by distinguishing “in-groups” whose members are characterized by certain qualities, from “out-groups” that not only lack these very attributes but also have deviant, negatively framed characteristics (Filc 2010).

Within these narratives, the potential of religious affiliation as a positive or negative identity marker becomes evident. A growing number of researchers have described how Western European populists positively refer to Christianity while framing Islam in negative terms in order to define the “collective self” (Roy 2016; Brubaker 2017; DeHanas and Shterin 2018). However, besides missing a profound empirical analysis, most research has also neglected the role of contextual settings. The article of Roy (2016) provides a notable exception. The author maintains that Marine Le Pen's National Front, since 2018 known as National Rally, has embraced France's idea of *laïcité*, strict state-church separation, in order to target Islam. We concur with this assessment. Since populist actors, first and foremost, construct “collective identities” by relating to a

nation, they do so against the background of specific *national* context factors; in Roy's article described by France's principle of strict secularity.

The significance of context factors for populist narratives has also been emphasized by Weyland (2017, 65) who argues that populists adapt their language to "contextual opportunities and constraints". Distinct narratives of nation building and historical myths have often been applied to fill the national context factors with specific content. They are employed to create a certain narrative on collective identity and national belonging. Eisenstadt (1991, 21) contends that mainly in Europe national ideas of collective communities "were especially influenced by constructions of community, that were established in the European history". If (national) communities were historically constructed with reference to a certain religion, it can be expected that populists would employ this religion in narratives defining current national identities. However, whether such a message resonates with the wider public also depends on the religiosity of the public. Correspondingly, one can presume that religious references lack actual content when the degree of secularization is high.

In the next section, national context factors in the Netherlands and Germany are depicted. Later they are used as an explanation to carve out national particularities and cross-national variations of religious references.

### **Histories of Nation Building, Traditional Roles of Religion in Society and Processes of Secularization: Germany and The Netherlands Compared**

In general, Germany and the Netherlands share ample communalities. While differing in power of central government and form of government, the Netherlands being a unitary constitutional monarchy and Germany a federal republic, both countries are known as stable, pluralistic, Western European parliamentary democracies with free and fair elections, high voter turnout, and a stable rule of law. However, in this section, we concentrate on some specific context factors where the two countries show important differences. When analyzing and interpreting the use of religious tropes by AfD and PVV later on, we do not intend to be deterministic, claiming that the narratives of the two populist parties are exclusively shaped by these contextual factors. Nevertheless, we contend that specific national discursive opportunity structures (Koopmans et al. 2005) are likely to influence the way populist actors refer to religion. This holds in particular when these actors construct collective identities as well as define societal in-groups and out-groups. In our view, these discursive opportunities primarily derive from the respective history of nation building, the traditional role of religion in society as well as secularization processes. In this session, the particularities of the German and Dutch context regarding these factors are concisely illustrated.

When it comes to nation-building, we do not provide a thorough retelling of historical developments but relate instead to central aspects and landmarks that help explain today's role of religion as a national identity marker in Germany and the Netherlands. In this context, it is the historical stability of the nation state and the traditional use of religion as an integral component binding the national collective that we deem most relevant. Since the role of religion as a national identity marker is not least dependent on a population's religiosity, we also account for the degree of secularization in the two countries.

Nation building in the Netherlands can be described as long and stable, with the Kingdom of the Netherlands being formed after the 1815 Vienna Congress. The basis for the current constitution was laid not long after, in 1848. The revolutions of that year resulted in the Netherlands becoming a constitutional monarchy establishing ministerial responsibility. The liberal statesman Thorbecke drafted the constitution that emphasized freedom of education and religion as well as stronger state-church separation (Knippenberg 2006, 321). Accordingly, parliamentary democracy has a more than one-and-a-half century long history in the Netherlands. Besides the constitutionally stable system, territorial borders have remained largely unaltered, meaning that there is a long-time convergence between territory and the inhabitants residing within it. Although the German occupation between 1940 and 1945 had an important impact on the Dutch identity replacing the original self-concept of neutrality with a transatlantic orientation, the Second World War hardly affected this concordance of Dutch national borders and population.

Though German statehood can be described as stable as well, certain historical particularities are a cause for more explicit claims as to what it actually means to be German. On the one hand, this can be traced back to the so-called belated German nation building which was not completed until 1871 (Jurt 2014). On the other hand, Germany's ultimate borders were unclear until its re-unification in 1990. Moreover, the country's devastating history of national socialism between 1933 and 1945 still continues to have an effect, since the "collapse of values" caused by fascism, war, and genocide resulted in an unease regarding positive references to the nation in postwar Germany or even in a "refusal of the nation" as Alter (1992, 186) puts it.

These particularities of German history created the need for an identity marker in post-war Germany that was able to stabilize the "German collective". At the same time, this very identity marker could not derive from nationalist or patriotic ideas since these had been discredited by the country's recent fascist past. In Eastern Germany, this void was quickly filled by the German Democratic Republic's (GDR) official doctrine of socialism. In contrast, in Western Germany's democratic Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), policy makers hoped that collective values might be provided by Christianity and the Christian churches. The Christian faith was perceived as an antithesis to national socialism, which was not only seen as barbaric and devastating but was also largely framed as an atheist ideology. By relating to Christianity and the Christian churches, decision makers also revived a tradition: Since the Reformation there had been a "close relationship between the Throne and the Altar" (Robbers 2019, 110) in Protestant German states and, later on as of 1871, between the united German Reich and the Protestant Church. The Weimar constitution of 1919 established state-church separation; however, the Protestant and—now also—the Catholic Church, that had been oppressed by the monarchist state in the so called *Kulturkampf*, were equally integrated into cooperation patterns with state authorities.

Given that in 1945 the vast majority of Germans were affiliated with the two major Christian denominations, referring to the Christian churches as crucial agents of collective values appeared obvious. This was also reflected in the prominent role granted for religious communities in the newly implemented constitution (*Grundgesetz*) of

1949, which reestablished cooperation patterns of the Weimar constitution. Officially, this status is open to all religious communities; in practice though mainly Christian churches and, to a certain extent, Jewish communities have benefitted. The German approach toward religious communities thus has reflected the idea of a “positive neutrality” of the state toward worldviews and religions: Although religion and state are separated, religion is generally expected to have a positive effect on creating societal values (Robbers 2019). Although average religiosity has decreased in Germany since 1945, also given the entry of the GDR into the scope of the *Grundgesetz* in 1990, political decision makers have never seriously questioned the prominent role of the churches.

Christianity has recently not played a comparable societal role in the Netherlands. After the Reformation, Lutheranism was less influential than in the German states, instead the teachings of Luther’s contemporary Johannes Calvin prevailed. In the following centuries, Calvinism developed into a public religion, which was supported by Dutch royalty. However, at the end of the 18th century, the process of separating church and state began. This reached a milestone in 1853 when the state was not only prohibited to interfere in internal matters of the Reformed Church but also instructed to support churches financially “only on a basis of equality between different denominations” (van den Brink and Loenen 2013, 20). This principle is accounted for until to date. The (public) role of religious organizations is not mentioned in the Dutch constitution. This unspecified role of the churches has recently facilitated “subtle, often ‘silent’ political agreements” (Davelaar et al. 2011, 75) that strengthened a narrative of a relatively strict state-church separation, albeit normative regulations have remained unchanged (Maussen and Vermeulen 2015).

At the same time, the degree of secularization in the Netherlands has increased rapidly, which is also considerably higher than in Germany (Pickel 2017). In this context, Knippenberg maintains that “the Netherlands is an interesting case because it combines a multi-confessional tradition with strong secularisation” (2006, 318). In 2017, a majority of the Dutch population defined itself as non-religious and more than 75% reported that they rarely attend religious services (CBS 2018). In contrast, a mere one-third of Germany’s population (33%) declared in the census of 2011 that they do not affiliate with any religion (Census 2011).<sup>1</sup>

When delving deeper into the question of how AfD in Germany and PVV in the Netherlands refer to religion, the specific contextual factors outlined above will be kept in mind. Before presenting our empirical analysis, we will provide a short introduction of the characteristics of the two parties.

### Right-Wing Populist Parties in Germany and The Netherlands: AfD and PVV

In 2017, national parliamentary elections were held in both the Netherlands and Germany. While neither of the right-wing populist parties, PVV and AfD, was able to clutch victory, both parties increased their vote share compared to the previous parliamentary election. Both parties attracted around 13% of the vote, and after coalitions were formed without the AfD and PVV, both parties became the largest opposition force. Particularly for the AfD, this was deemed a success, as it was the first time the party had entered Germany’s federal parliament after narrowly missing the 5% electoral threshold in the previous 2013 election. In contrast, the PVV had

become a longstanding force in the Dutch Second Chamber. After first entering parliament in 2006, the party had continuously ranked among the top three parties in the highly splintered Dutch political landscape and attracted a double-digit vote share in the elections of 2010, 2012, and 2017.

Besides having different parliamentary trajectories, two other differences between the parties stand out. First, they have a dissimilar party structure. While the AfD lacks clear-cut leadership, typically visible in other Western European right-wing populist parties,<sup>2</sup> party membership is open to citizens. This is not the case for the PVV. Here party leader and founder Geert Wilders is the sole member with party membership being closed for others. Seats in parliament are filled with party representatives.<sup>3</sup> Apart from the different party organization, an interactional distinction can be discerned between the populist parties and the other parties in parliament. In the Netherlands, the PVV has played an important role in coalition building. In 2010, the party provided parliamentary support to a minority government that consisted of the liberal conservative VVD and Christian democratic CDA. On a sub-national level, these three parties have formed a coalition. In contrast, the AfD in Germany is placed more on the side-lines, with the major parties in the Bundestag opposing a possible coalition with the AfD.

These differences aside, both parties also share ample communalities. AfD and PVV have been described as anti-elitist, anti-EU, and anti-immigration, hence explaining the populist label that has been attributed to both parties. The parties' stance toward Islam stands out. Vossen (2017) demonstrates that the program of the PVV consists of four cornerstones, of which he argues anti-Islamic alarmism has become the party's dominant theme. Islam is perceived as "a totalitarian, immutable ideology, regardless of time and location" (Vossen 2017, 30). Similarly, van Kessel (2017) claims that for the PVV, Islam is at odds with Dutch liberal and humanist values. The party uses Islam as an exclusionary criterion "as a means to identify the 'others', whose faith was considered to be incompatible with Dutch culture and values" (van Kessel 2017, 76). Islam is thus unmistakably seen as a negative point of reference.

Similarly, the AfD, while starting off as a Eurosceptic party, increasingly started focusing on Islam, particularly in the aftermath of the 2015 European "refugee crisis". In the first years of its existence, researchers could not agree whether the AfD qualified as "populist",<sup>4</sup> not least since many members had come from the Christian conservative CDU and liberal FDP. However, after the more moderate party founder and leader Bernd Lucke, a former Christian Democrat, was overturned in 2015 and the party changed its focus to anti-immigration, the AfD has been consistently classified as right-wing populist. Simultaneously, the AfD has increasingly focused on Muslims and Islam as its central concept of the enemy. This is reflected in its basic manifesto of 2016 saying: "Islam does not belong to Germany" (Häusler 2017, 70). The subsequent section assesses the religious references of AfD and PVV MPs in greater detail.

### Empirical Analysis<sup>5</sup>

The following analysis is based upon the examination of parliamentary documents such as plenary protocols, inquiries, and motions. These have been published online

by the national parliaments in Germany (Bundestag) and the Netherlands (Tweede Kamer). Documents from late 2017, the moment the AfD entered the German national parliament, until the end of 2019 were assessed. Statements identified in the analysis were examined via an in-depth qualitative framing analysis suggesting that there are multiple interpretations in policymaking (Verloo and Lombardo 2007). The analysis shows that both AfD and PVV refer to all three monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. They are, however, framed in different ways.

### *Framing the Evil: Islam*

Islam serves as the central adversarial image for both the AfD and PVV. In this context, members of parliament rarely distinguish between “Islam” and “Islamism”. Instead, the parties generally argue that there is no difference between the two, and that Islam is of itself inherently radical. Yet, a subtle but important distinction can be discerned when the two parties refer to Islam. While the AfD still grants Islam the character of a religion, the PVV likens Islam to a “totalitarian ideology”.

When referring to Islam, AfD MPs are anxious to blur any distinction between Islam and Islamism. In a plenary session, MP Beatrix von Storch speaks of “Islamic terror”<sup>6</sup> and “violent Islam”, emphasizing that terror and violence are inherent to the religion (17th session, 03/01/19). MP Gottfried Curio quotes the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, when stating that “there is no Islam and Islamism but only one Islam”. Curio concludes that the Qur’an taught at public schools is the same as the one represented by Salafists (24th session, 03/23/18).

The PVV reads from the same page when treating Islam as a fundamental monolithic whole and claiming that the religion lacks internal debate or pluralistic tendencies. MP Machiel de Graaf: “Islam is not inclusive and not diverse. The only gender issue that Islam has is to subordinate women. They are only worth half of the man, it is stated in Sharia” (29th session, 11/27/2019). In a different plenary session, De Graaf claims: “Islam is always radical and there will always be professional Muslims who take the lead in getting everyone back in the box, and that box is called Islam” (87th session, 05/30/2018). The PVV, like the AfD, does not only equate Islam to Islamism, defining it as inherently militant, but the party also goes a step further. The PVV’s attacks on Islam are even more vehement when presenting Islam as a totalitarian ideology and denying it its religious status. MPs have compared Islam to fascism and national socialism, and have argued that the faith threatens rule of law. MP Harm Beertema states that Islam “is an inherently violent, imperialistic, fascist ideology that aims to overthrow our constitutional state, just like national socialism” (108th session, 09/12/2019). On a similar note, Machiel de Graaf, party spokesperson on integration, associates Islam with ideologies he deems violent: “The successes of the five great collectivism known to the world—national and international socialism, communism, fascism and Islam—can only be counted in the numbers of dead bodies” (78th session, 04/23/2019).

AfD and PVV have in common that MPs from both parties are anxious to substantiate their claims against Islam by directly referring to the religion’s major holy book, the Qur’an. AfD representatives regularly present quotes from the Qur’an that, in their view, not only show the violent character of Islam but also highlight



the incompatibility between Islam on the one hand, and liberal and democratic values on the other hand. MP Gottfried Curio speaks of an “alleged compatibility of Islam with democracy” stating that “there will be no liberal Islam”: “It’s the Qur’an itself that says: ‘Kill the infidels, they are worse than cattle; when women revolt, beat them; don’t make friends with Jews and Christians; Allah has cursed the infidels and prepared them for the flames’”(24th session, 03/23/18).

The PVV similarly directly quotes from or refers to the Qur’an to underline the messianic and violent character of Islam. MP De Graaf: “In Qur’an, Sura 8, verse 60 we can read that it is an assignment for all Muslims to teach all unbelievers from an Islamic perspective that Islam should be feared” (34th session, 12/11/2018). In a speech, likening Salafists to regular Muslims, De Graaf states: “Exactly as written down in Qur’an 8, verse 12, ‘Sow fear into the hearts of non-Muslims. Chop off their heads and also their fingertips.’ It is literally there. It’s an assignment” (25th session, 11/20/2018).

These quotes and statements of the Qur’an illustrate the parties’ position on Islam. Moreover, MPs can show that their fears and viewpoints are not unfounded. By specifically referring to certain passages, as the quote of De Graaf above illustrates, MPs can demonstrate that they have a certain expertise of the subject matter at hand. AfD MPs show themselves as interpreters of the Qur’an, when claiming that the book contains direct commands to Muslims to commit to phenomena such as “polygamy, child marriage, forced marriage, honor killing, homophobia, minor rights, and corporal punishment of women, anti-Semitism, persecution of Christians, stoning, beheading, holy war” (Gottfried Curio, 55th session, 10/11/18). AfD MP Martin Hohmann claims to quote police statistics when suggesting that “the Qur’an encourages to murder and to punish Jews, Christians and infidels” (33rd session, 05/17/18).

Not only are representatives from both parties convinced about their interpretation of the Qur’an, but they also assert that many Muslims are guided by the scripture. AfD MP Christian Wirth refers to a survey conducted by the opinion research institute Emnid, when not only arguing that “47 per cent of Turks living in Germany think that religious laws are more important than the secular laws of our country”, but that the problem is even more serious since the share of descendants of immigrated Turks describing themselves as “strongly religious” is higher (72%) than the share of their parents (62%) (29th session, 06/14/2018). In another debate, MP Beatrix von Storch, first quotes empirical results of a study by social scientist Ruud Koopmans alleging that “Koopmans ranks 40 per cent of Muslims in Western Europe to the strong fundamentalists” and, second, mentions surveys conducted by Pew Research Center implying that in Islamic countries a large group, maybe even the majority of people, believe that suicide attacks are legitimate (68th session, 11/29/18).

Akin to the AfD, the PVV claims that numerous Muslims in the Netherlands consider Islamic rules to be more important than Dutch laws. MP Markuszower highlights the issue, maintaining that there are “100.000 potential Jihadists” (65th session, 03/27/2018) in the Netherlands. PVV MPs also contend that the Qur’an strongly influences the beliefs and values of the lion’s share of the Dutch Muslim population. Since PVV MPs assert that Islam is not a minor problem, they demand drastic measures, including a ban on the Qur’an and discarding Islam altogether. Party

leader Geert Wilders: “I have said it before: no less than 70 per cent of Muslims in the Netherlands believe that Islamic rules outweigh Dutch laws. 70 per cent of Muslims in the Netherlands reject our laws and thus choose Sharia in the Netherlands, anti-Semitism, misogyny, Christianophobia, homophobia. 70 per cent is a majority. So, we don’t have, as people try to tell us, a problem with just a few extremist Muslims. No, we have a mega problem with the majority of Muslims in the Netherlands. 70 per cent of Muslims in the Netherlands say that Islamic rules, i.e. Sharia, are more important than the laws we democratically make here. That is why we have to get rid of Islam” (2nd session, 09/19/2018).

Therefore, while both parties see Islam as a severe threat, PVV MPs claim that Islam possesses a more acute danger to society. Both parties perceive Islam as the alien other standing at odds with the respective morals of German and Dutch society. However, it is only the PVV that calls it an “existential problem” as professed by party leader Wilders (16th session, 11/01/2017). Correspondingly, fighting Islam is seen as an obligation, on which the very survival of Dutch society depends on. Wilders: “If we want our children and grandchildren and their children to remain free people, then we must fight Islam with all democratic means we have” (3rd session, 09/21/2018). “De-islamization” is the key word and considered an important objective. Geert Wilders: “De-Islamization is therefore a matter of survival. It is not hatred. It is pure self-preservation. It is love for the Netherlands. Love for our own country. Love for our freedom” (2nd session, 09/19/2018).

### *Framing the Good: Christianity and Judaism*

In sharp contrast to their dismissive stance on Islam, both AfD and PVV refer positively to Christianity, framing it as “domestic”. However, in their statements, an important distinction can be drawn. While the PVV claims to be predominantly concerned with defending Christian *civilization*, the message of AfD MPs is less straightforward. Representatives at times proclaim to protect a Christian tradition, while on other occasions relating to the characteristics of the Christian *faith*.

AfD representatives speak of an allegedly inherent difference between Christianity and Islam. MP Volker Münz states: “In contrast to Christianity, Islam does not know any separation between state and church” (30th session, 04/27/18). PVV MPs, no longer labelling Islam as a religion, make different assertions about Christianity and its values. Representatives claim that these values are embedded in a larger whole, often grouping these values together with Western and liberal values, including religious freedom, liberty and tolerance. Gidi Markuszower illustrates: “The Netherlands is built on Judeo-Christian and humanistic values. That is our culture. Islam is categorically not a part of it” (25th session, 11/20/2018). Representatives from both parties cherish Judeo-Christian values and traditions. This position reflects the attempt of the two parties to also incorporate Judaism into the positive self.

However, the proclamations of PVV MPs about Christianity and Judaism are often vague and thus rarely specific. This is in stark contrast to the explicit references that are made about Islam and its scriptures. Such substantive remarks appear less often when representatives speak of Christianity and Judaism. Consequently, the Bible or the Torah rarely receive attention. Instead, an opposition is created between

Christianity and Judaism on the one hand, and Islam on the other hand. Islam is seen as threatening Christianity and Judaism, and the values that these religions stand for.

Compared to their Dutch counterparts, AfD representatives relate more frequently to Christianity and Christians, and emphasize to hold dear specific “Christian values” and a “community of Christians”. However, this image of Christians and Christianity is often portrayed in contrast to Islam. Similar to the PVV, the AfD mostly combines references to Christianity with the narrative of Christians as victims of Muslim prosecutors, both domestically as well as globally. AfD MPs express sympathy toward Christian victims of Muslims. Moreover, they demand that Germany—as a “Christian country”—stands up for these victims and punishes their oppressors. In a plenary session, MP Dietmar Friedhoff argues that “a Christian country basically should not support countries where Christians are persecuted and killed, and it should not invest in countries where human rights are generally being infringed” (93rd session, 04/05/19). In a motion introduced by the AfD in April 2018 the party calls on the government to “Stop and sanction the persecution of Christians” (motion of the AfD party group; 04/17/2018). During a plenary debate on the issue, MP Jürgen Braun demands governmental measures, such as “cuts of development aid for persecutor states, programs against hostility towards Christians for asylum seekers and [...] refugee quotas for persecuted Christians” (59th session, 10/19/18). His fellow party group member Friedhoff not only calls for “humanitarian help [for Christians]”, too, but also defines this as an act of “Christian brotherly love and obligation” (93rd session, 04/05/19).

In contrast, the PVV frames the differences between Christianity and Islam in primarily civilizational or ideological terms. Whereas Islam is seen as violent and radical, Christian values are perceived as the cradle of Dutch civilization and therefore deserving protection. Consequently, when speaking about Christianity, the party’s focus lies on Christian traditions, symbols and holidays, and how they have shaped the Netherlands and are thus worth cherishing. MP Martin Bosma is appalled that in Amsterdam, Christian holidays and symbols are adapted or abolished, whereas Islamic traditions are celebrated: “Chairwoman, we are at the mercy of the gods. In Amsterdam, Saint-Nicholas no longer has a Christian cross on his miter, because that is hurtful to Mohammedans. In Amsterdam, the Christmas market can no longer be called a Christmas market. In Amsterdam, our dear Zwarte Piet was systematically destroyed by the politically correct city council. Meanwhile, Muslim traditions are celebrated exuberantly, see the iftar that had a police escort” (22nd session, 11/15/2017).

Similar to AfD MPs, PVV representatives proclaim that Islam threatens Christianity, both at home and abroad. MP De Graaf: “Professor Hans Jansen taught us the Islamic proverb: ‘after Saturday comes Sunday’. According to his explanation, that means: when the Jews run out, it is the Christians’ turn. We have seen that in North Africa, during the first expansions of Islam, but also now we still see it with the Copts, who are being decimated. Recently, of course, we also saw it in Syria, with the Yazidis” (29th session, 11/28/2018). Yet, dissimilar to the AfD, the PVV refrains to refer to these groups as “fellow-Christians” which could imply a responsibility to defend the prosecuted. Instead, rather than placing a strong focus on Christian solidarity and correspondingly attempt to appeal to Christian voters, the message of the party is directed to a wider, less specific audience, including the secular electorate.

The narrative of seeing Islam as a threat becomes especially noticeable when both parties refer to Judaism and Jews in general. The AfD particularly warns of an expected rise in anti-Semitism in Germany, when opposing immigration from Muslim majority countries. Whereas other parties have referred to the German history of the Third Reich to support the acceptance of refugees, MP Anton Friesen uses Germany's past to strengthen the AfD's anti-immigration position: "It is bitter irony, no, it is historical cynicism that Germany of all countries pursues an immigrant policy that enables the mass import of Islamic anti-Semitism" (86th session, 03/14/19). The "import of Islamic anti-Semitism" is a central narrative of AfD MPs, which leads to formulated demands, for example, by party group leader Alexander Gauland: "Anti-Semitism must not become the collateral damage of a wrong refugee and immigration policy" (29th session, 04/26/18). Muslims are perceived as possible perpetrators, whereas Jews—just like Christians—are depicted as persecuted victims. In a plenary session, MP Beatrix von Storch argues: "According to the [Jewish] newspaper 'Jüdische Allgemeine', since 2006 40,000 Jews have emigrated from France, have escaped from Islamic terror and anti-Semitism. We must and, please, we want to prevent this in Germany" (52nd session, 09/27/18). The PVV also perceives Islam as the first and foremost culprit of anti-Semitism. MP De Graaf: "Islam is the only institutionalized form of anti-Semitism in the Netherlands" (34th session, 12/11/2018). MP Sietse Fritsma, similarly, proclaimed, when talking about immigration and the corresponding assumption that immigrants from predominantly Islamic countries pose a threat to the Jewish population in the Netherlands: "We see it happening on the street every day. Jews can no longer walk on the streets with a kippah" (31st session, 12/04/2018).

Besides denouncing Islam, both AfD and PVV also target other actors. Particularly parties from the left, but also Christian Democrats as well as churches are condemned of not defending or even betraying the national (Christian) culture. AfD MP Jürgen Braun accuses the mainstream parties of the left, the Social Democrats and Greens of having their origins and ideas from "Communism where God is being denied" (59th session, 10/19/18). At the same time, the Churches are blamed of being part of a "cartel of opinion givers" (MP Nicole Hoechst, 7th session 01/18/18) or as "vicarious agents of the Red, the Left and the Greens" (MP Thomas Ehrhorn, 27th session 04/20/18). When speaking of the Christian Democrats, MP Jürgen Braun describes the party not only as "used to be Christian Union", but also as "lukewarm Christians" quoting the Bible in the Revelation of John, chapter 3, verse 16: "If you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.' End of quote.—Lukewarm Christians are half-pagans!" (102nd session, 05/17/19) The AfD is also ferocious of the mainstream parties' stance toward Israel and Jews in general. Concerning the mainstream parties' relations to Jews and Israel, AfD MP Jürgen Braun argues: "The Jewish state cannot rely on the coalition and the left opposition in this parliament. [...] The anti-Semitism of today comes from the left, it comes from Islam" (102nd session, 05/17/19).

Similarly, the PVV attacks other political parties, with left-wing and progressive parties being predominantly targeted. These parties are blamed for desiring a multicultural and cosmopolitan society, in which national traditions have no place. MP De Graaf: "Multicultural society is the sacred, untouchable aspiration of many people in

the Netherlands. I am mainly talking about politically correct people, about the left, the extreme left, the left-Christian and the liberal Netherlands. But for more and more people it is turning into a multicultural hell” (37th session, 12/20/2017). In this context, MP Martin Bosma also blames churches and universities (40th session, 01/17/2018). MPs accuse established institutions and political parties for not representing the interest of the Dutch people and for eroding Christian traditions in the Netherlands. The two confessional parties’ part of government, CDA and ChristenUnie, are also seen as liable, as they are unwilling to protect Christians and correspondingly do not represent their voter base and facilitate the descent of Christianity. In contrast, the PVV portrays itself as a party that takes the concerns of the Christian voter base into consideration. MP De Graaf addresses them in an almost crusade-like tone: “That is why I ask that part of the Christian population of the Netherlands that does bow its head: where has the practical implementation of the ‘forward, Christian warriors, following Christ’s holy vane’ gone?” (29th session, 11/28/2018). The other political parties are also accused of anti-Semitic behavior or of facilitating discrimination against Jews. In a session late 2018, Gidi Markuszower criticizes the Dutch Labor party (PvdA) for inviting Jeremy Corbyn to its party congress (9th session, 10/04/2018). The PVV instead claims to defend the Jewish population in the Netherlands. During a debate, Markuszower argues that Jewish institutions had to pay for their own protection and drew a connection between this topic and the party’s anti-Islamic viewpoints, when asserting: “At present, the Jewish community in the Netherlands still has to bear a large part of its own security costs. The PVV proposes that every bank transaction from and to an Islamic country be charged an additional 0.1 per cent. From these earnings we can protect Dutch culture and finance the costs for a safe Jewish community” (25th session, 11/20/2018).

Though the PVV is not a confessional party and party leader Wilders maintains that he himself is agnostic (2nd session, 09/19/2018), the party does proclaim to stand for the interests of Christians and Jews in the Netherlands. MPs argue that they intend to tackle Islam, the biggest threat to all Dutch inhabitants, whether they are Christian, Jewish, or secular. Though MPs acknowledge that Christianity can be at odds with liberal values and customs, including homosexuality, the religion is exonerated as it preaches respect and dialogue, unlike Islam. MP Fleur Agema illustrates this standpoint in a session on the Nashville statement, a document in which conservative protestant actors oppose LGBT sexuality: “Christians who reject homosexuality on the basis of their faith are not the Christians with whom I feel connected. But nowhere in those Christian communities is there a call for violence against LGBTI people. The declaration is, as far as we are concerned, an insensitive, cold and distant statement, but it remains embedded in the Protestant Christian tradition of reflection, conversation and dialogue” (83rd session, 05/16/2019).

Like its Dutch counterpart, the AfD portrays itself as the (last) defender of Christianity and Judaism, its commitment toward Christianity, however, goes beyond that of the PVV, by claiming to be the real confessional party. AfD MP Braun asserts: “The people in the country know: From now on, the C in the name belongs to the AfD!” (59th session, 10/19/18). This is in clear contrast to the PVV which—although eagerly defending the Christian culture—still attaches great importance to keeping a secularist self-image. Nevertheless, although AfD representatives are anxious to depict

themselves as “pro-Christian”, positions on Christianity as a whole appear to be more ambiguous. Statements of commitment toward Christianity are rather vague, as representatives mostly refrain from referring directly from the Bible to clarify these “Christian values”.

### The Devil is in the Detail: Compare and Contrast Against The Background of National Context Factors

In the previous section, an extensive analysis was drawn based on German and Dutch parliamentary documents. At first sight, it appears that AfD and PVV have almost identical positions toward the several religions, with both parties attempting to pigeonhole Islam and Christianity where they are perceived to belong. Hence, the religions are viewed in either a positive or negative light, with Islam receiving particular attention. MPs from both parties view the religion as the “malevolent other”. Correspondingly, it does not belong to the domestic society. Conversely, Christianity and Judaism are seen as benevolent and thus part of the inherent in-group. Hence, the typical binary perception of populists, generalizing segments of society in positive or negative terms, can be found here as well.

Yet when delving deeper and examining the parliamentary documents in closer detail, subtle variations become apparent. While the key message is very similar, the distinctions deserve greater scrutiny. We maintain that the specific national context factors, such as the history of nation-building, the traditional role of religion in society, and the degree of secularization, can explain why AfD and PVV have a distinct focus when referring to the different religions. While this explanation is exploratory in nature and other factors, such as the different history and structure of the two parties as well as the dissimilar political systems of the two countries, are also expected to play an important role, we contend that the national context factors are needed to fill in the blank and provide a necessary nuance.

#### *Islam*

Both parties have a similar image of Islam and depict the religion as an “alien other”, incompatible with national society. Islam is equated with Islamism and is seen as having an inherently militant worldview. Correspondingly, AfD and PVV MPs perceive the religion as radical, violent and backward, and argue that the religion lacks internal pluralism and heterogeneity, thereby justifying their undifferentiated perspective of the religion. Direct quotes from the Qur’an and other scriptures are used to substantiate these claims. Moreover, MPs from both parties maintain that these scripts play a significant role in the lives of many Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands, thus portraying Islam as a real threat to the respective societies.

AfD and PVV however frame Islam differently. For the AfD, Islam is perceived as a dangerous religion, while the PVV claims that Islam should rather be seen as a totalitarian ideology, comparable to the most violent ideologies of the 20th century. Hence, the PVV takes a more alarmist stance than its German counterpart. The proposals in parliament that are intended to curtail Islam demonstrate the difference in perception. The PVV has called for a ban on the Qur’an and the closure of mosques

and Islamic schools. All in all, the party thus seeks to discard Islam altogether, with the general objective to de-Islamize the Netherlands. So far, the AfD has refrained from proposing such radical measures. By comparing Islam to totalitarian ideologies, the PVV discredits Islam altogether and does not recognize it as a religion. This is a step that the AfD has not (yet) been willing to take.

What explains this distinction? We contend that the answer to this question lies in Germany's distinct historical experience. The devastating history of national socialism, the Holocaust in particular, is an integral part of national conscience. The main lesson in Germany still being: never again. Thus, it remains a taboo to equate Islam with the totalitarian ideologies of the past. While the devastations of the Second World War and the immeasurably painful Shoah are an indispensable part of history lessons in the Netherlands as well, the discourse about the Second World War and its horrors is different, given that Nazi Germany invaded and occupied the Netherlands. In this respect, it is Germany's specific culture of remembrance, with a strong focus on collective responsibility and national culpability regarding the fate of Europe's Jews that makes statements questioning Islam's religious credentials unseemly.

Hence, thus far the AfD has refrained from delegitimizing Islam's religious credentials. The party is already under a magnifying glass, with several commentators equating the AfD with the NSDAP. Calls, similar to that of the PVV, to ban the Qur'an and close mosques would most likely lead to an immense outcry. Similarly, comparing Islam to a totalitarian ideology is a step that the AfD has not yet taken, preferring to speak instead of a violent religion.

### *Christianity*

Compared to Islam, both parties take a more positive approach toward Christianity. Moreover, explicit references about the religion are uncommon. Whereas MPs from both parties come up with detailed citations from the Qur'an, direct expressions from the Bible are scarce. In his wide-ranging study of populist parties in Europe, Brubaker expects that the two parties refer to Christianity differently. On closer scrutiny, the plenary protocols do not provide conclusive evidence to support this claim. The difference between AfD and PVV regarding Christianity is more subtle. As predicted, the PVV often times refers to Christianity in opaque terms, stressing Christian traditions and values. Hence, we agree with Brubaker's assessment that the PVV in the Netherlands perceives Christianity more in civilizational than in religious terms. For the AfD, the picture is less clear-cut. On the one hand, the party wants to convey the message that it is the true Christian party in Germany, a role that, according to AfD MPs, the Christian Democrats no longer play. Yet one can question whether this narrative of AfD MPs as true adherers to Christian religion is sincere.

A strong base of the party consists of the population in the former East German *Länder*, a populace that is strongly secular. Moreover, when the party speaks of Christianity or wanting to protect Christian refugees, it does little to substantiate the claim. Similar to the PVV's use of the religion, Christianity then appears to be an empty signifier for the AfD. This however is not the complete story. The party also tries to appeal to the more religious voters in the West German *Länder*. The tiptoeing of the AfD when it comes to Christianity can be explained by the divergence of

religiosity between inhabitants of former Eastern Germany and Western Germany. The post-Second World War division of Germany, with the East founded on secular socialism and the West searching for a new identity marker that to a certain extent became Christianity, still, on large, corresponds with the dissimilar degree of secularization. The effects of the different bases on which the FRG and the GDR were founded can be discerned until today, even though the Berlin Wall has fallen more than 30 years ago.

The empirical analysis has also shown that, all in all, the AfD defines Christianity in more positive terms, consisting of actual value, whereas the PVV describes Christianity merely in juxtaposition to Islam. Substantive elements of what Christianity truly entails are rare. More so, it is not essential for the PVV to make such substantive claims. Such claims would not resonate with a large part of the electorate, given that a majority of the Dutch population defines itself as secular. There are two reasons for why Christianity is seen more positively in Germany. First, as explained above, more Germans still identify themselves with the two main national Christian denominations. The degree of secularization has simply progressed more slowly compared to the Netherlands. Second, in Western Germany, Christianity was seen as a new identity marker after the horrific Nazi era subsided. This approach has proven to be particularly salient. Christianity was not only useful as a contrast to national socialism, but also to set the FRG apart from the communist dictatorship of the GDR. In shaping Germany's new democratic identity, Christianity simply appeared to be useful. This in part might also explain why the secularization process has progressed less swiftly in Germany.

Unsurprisingly, Christian Democratic parties have always played a significant role in post-1945 (West)German politics and do so until now. This might explain the attempts of the AfD to see itself as a true Christian alternative to the CDU and to cast the latter in a bad light. With more Germans casting their vote for Christian Democratic parties and identifying themselves with Christianity, this block provides a greater voter potential for the AfD than it does for its western counterpart. Hence, in an attempt to gain support from these voters, the AfD stresses its Christian roots, speaks of the importance of the Christian cross being placed in classrooms, and claims to adhere to a Christian *Leitkultur*. This approach, stressing one's true Christian nature, would be far less fruitful for the PVV. Given that the population is strongly secularized, support for Christian Democratic parties is less prevalent and since there is a long and stable history of nation building in the Netherlands, there is no need for the PVV to make explicit claims about Christianity and the national identity of the country.

## Conclusions

Five years ago, little was known about the relationship between populism and religion. Since then, substantial progress has been made through contributions from Brubaker (2017), Marzouki et al. (2016), and others. With this article, we intended to build upon this previous research having two main objectives. First, provide an extensive empirical analysis, based on parliamentary documents, on how the AfD in Germany and the PVV in the Netherlands respectively refer to religion. And second, look for explanations that help explain why these two parties deal with religious tropes in their narratives in the specific way they do.



After assessing the parliamentary documents, we found that both AfD and PVV frame Judeo-Christianity in positive terms. In contrast, Islam is perceived negatively. Our findings are in accordance with those of previous authors, who studied the two respective parties.<sup>7</sup> Both Christianity and Judaism are seen as virtuous and worth protecting, while Islam is seen as a threat that needs tackling. Our findings thus show that the self-other antagonism typically found in populist parties can be transferred to the populist parties' use of religious references as well. However, while it appears that both parties make use of explicit references about Islam, such substantive statements are less apparent when it comes to Judaism and Christianity. In contrast to the precise remarks about Islam, with quotes from the Qur'an and Sharia, proclamations about Judaism and Christianity are nebulous, ill-defined, and opaque at best.

Regarding Islam, it becomes clear that the PVV takes a more alarmist stance than the AfD, comparing the religion with violent ideologies from the past. Correspondingly, MPs from the Dutch party propose—compared to their German counterparts—more draconian measures, such as banning the Qur'an and demanding the closure of mosques. Regarding Christianity, the narrative of PVV MPs is more straightforward than that of its eastern counterpart, with Dutch representatives predominantly framing Christianity in civilizational terms. The AfD takes a more balanced approach and provides Christianity with more content. At times substantive remarks about Christianity can be discerned, while on other occasions the message is fairly similar to the PVV's civilizational approach. Our extensive empirical research has shown the benefit of an in-depth analysis, when intending to obtain a more detailed picture of the complex relationship between populism and religion.

In order to achieve our second goal, that is, providing explanations for the use of religious narratives by AfD and PVV respectively, we focused on national context factors in Germany and the Netherlands and contended that looking at these factors will help in providing an answer to the question of why populist parties refer to Christianity and Islam in the specific way they do. We suggest that the relevant context factors can be found in the respective histories of nation building, the traditional roles of religion in society as well as the particularities of secularization processes. Particularly the differences in narratives used by representatives of AfD and PVV imply that the MPs adapt their language to these nationally diverging context factors. Needless to say, populist actors (need to) formulate their narratives in a way that resonates with the perspectives prevalent in their respective society at large.

However, the argument of this research is neither definitive nor exhaustive and should be assessed in future research projects by, for instance, investigating other societies to provide a more generalizable assessment. Furthermore, as also maintained, other explanations deserve closer scrutiny in the future, too. It might also be fruitful to account for the specifics of party systems in order to provide a more comprehensive picture. Finally, the impact of *internal* structural differences between populist parties should be considered as well. This aspect is also of relevance when observing the AfD since the party has already—and in spite of its young age—gone through several internal upheavals leading to increasing radicalization. While starting as a Eurosceptic party the party has moved further to the fringes of the right-wing spectrum. The question is if the AfD will start proposing similar draconian measures as the PVV when it comes to Islam. Considering that the AfD entered

parliament a decade later than its western counterpart, it might also be that the party, in the end, will follow a similar trajectory as the PVV.

## Notes

1. Given that Germany's last official census took place six years before the Dutch statistics bureau assessed the degree of religiosity in the Netherlands, one could argue that the difference in religiosity between the Netherlands and Germany can for a certain part be explained by the fact that Germany's census predates the Dutch numbers. However, subsequent studies in 2017 and 2018 from the German General Social Survey and International Social Survey Programme reflect the numbers of the 2011 German census and show similar percentages of non-affiliation.
2. For example, Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini, or Filip Dewinter.
3. Formally the PVV is registered as an association, consisting of Geert Wilders and the foundation "Group Wilders". Shortly after its inception, the PVV decided to close membership, which has thus far not been opened, explaining the notion of the PVV as a one-man party.
4. Two years after the party had been established Arzheimer (2015, 551) denied this arguing: "There is no evidence of nativism or populism in the party's manifesto, which sets it apart from most of the other new right parties in Europe."
5. All information of German parliamentary documents has been obtained from: <https://www.bundestag.de/de/konumente>. All information of Dutch parliamentary documents has been obtained from: <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/>. All statements can be found in their original language on these websites.
6. All translations from German and Dutch, respectively, to English are our own. In our translations, we tried to stay as close to the original text as possible, thereby not polishing the language of the MPs.
7. Vossen (2017), van Kessel (2017), and Häusler (2017).

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