Book review

Party Politics

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Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, and Olivier Roy (eds), *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion*, London: Hurst & Company, 2016; 288 pp.; ISBN: 978-1-107-62108-4, £25.00 (pbk), £65.00 (hbk)

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Political scientists Nadia Marzouki and Duncan McDonnell set the stage for *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion* in the introductory chapter. The book addresses the relationship between religion and today's right-wing populisms, and subsequent chapters show that populists use religion as an expression of identity—of belonging to a rooted, native people, to a given territory—rather than as the stuff of faith, theology, or belief. Hence, the subtitle's mention of a “hijacking” of religion, a sort of takeover of the image and symbolism of a “Christian Identity of Europe” to serve strategic political purposes in the combat of the good, native people against the bad establishment and a myriad of dangerous others. Such is the thread—combined with the focus on the Church's reaction to populists—that runs throughout this edited book, except, logically, in the chapter dedicated to Jewish religious populism.

McDonnell's discussion of the *Lega Nord* is a case in point. The *calculated* nature of the Northern Italian populists' relationship with religion, from the Lega's founding by Umberto Bossi to its existence today under Matteo Salvini, is put on display, in the sense that the defense by the party of the Italian/European “Christian people” under siege is above all a way of reinforcing the unsurpassable cultural divide with a foreign, non-European, mostly Muslim, Other. When Leila Hadj-Abdou, writing on the religious conversion of the Austrian Freedom Party, says that it was the result of a “populist mobilization strategy rather than an indicator of adherence to a faith,” she touches on the same cultural dimension of the invocation of Christianity, particularly in an anti-Islamic fashion. Focusing on the rather successful Swiss People's Party, Oscar Mazzoleni shows that the anti-Islamic stance of the party—exemplified by the support given to the campaign to ban minarets in the country—is rooted not in a defense of a religious faith

but in the Identitarian marker of a Western Christian culture. Stijn van Kessel explains why secularized Dutch society serves as impediment for the success of any sort of religious populism, even if current populists such as Geert Wilders invoke Christianity as a way of furthering the otherness of Islam with regard to native culture and values. From the beginning to the end of his chapter on the French Front National, Olivier Roy stresses the employment of Christianity in the party narrative as “matter of identity, not of faith or religious observance,” even if there is a new wing of militants gathered around the younger Marion Maréchal-Le Pen that emphasizes traditional Catholic values amidst the wider secularized society. Timothy Peace describes British society as an “infertile breeding ground” for religious populism, and the ultimate failure of the British National Party—which attempted to bring in Christianity to the political combat against Islam—to gain any sort of traction among voters is presented as yet further evidence.

The following chapters turn to Central Europe, where populist mobilization through religion is more pronounced. In Poland, Ben Stanley writes, such mobilization occurred both through the Catholic-nationalist agenda of the League of Polish Families *and* the more premeditated behavior of the now-ruling party Law and Justice, which has exploited religious identity and values, even if a further realignment of the party system around the politics of religious populism is still uncertain. Describing the right-wing “illiberal populist takeover” of Hungary, symbolized by Victor Orban's Fidesz accession to power, Zoltán Ádám and András Bozóki note that here too Christianity is invoked as a companion to ethno-nationalism as well as a way—in the context of mass migrations—to distinguish Hungary *and* Europe from the “ethnic other.”

The next two chapters are forays outside of Europe. Marzouki writes about the relation between the Tea Party and religion, noting not only the strong support given by conservative evangelicals to the movement (in what has been named “teavangelicalism”) but also the fact that activists fuse the ideal of a Christian America—often in opposition to Islam—with a particular, “fundamentalist reading” of its history and Constitution. In Israel, Dani Filc argues, the populism of the Association of Sephardic Torah Keepers, more popularly known as Shas, balances an inclusive

side—in terms of the religious and cultural symbolic inclusion of the excluded Mizrahim, as well as calls for social and economic justice—with an exclusionary side, against non-Jews, especially migrant workers, asylum seekers, and the alleged “bogus” Jews, Russians.

In the incisive wrap-up chapter, Olivier Roy stresses the Identitarian nature of Europe’s populists’ use of religion (Christendom over Christianity), the overriding theme of Islamization, and the ambivalent response from the Church toward the populist challenge—often critical at the level of prelates but also finding some support among the local clergy. Toward the end, Roy expresses the most important insight of the book: often, in their defense of a Christian Europe, populists wage their anti-Islam combat in the name of liberal and progressive values against an illiberal Islam—values which, in fact, contribute to the secularization of Europe (and de-Christianization of the continent). Behold the paradox.

A strong book, well organized, and with first-rate research throughout, *Saving the People* addresses an all-too neglected topic. For the most part, the focus is on the

politicization of religion, or the use of traditional religion to legitimate political ends. There is another vector to populists’ relationship with religion that is called sacralization of politics; this is not addressed here (with the exception of the chapter on Hungary). The rise of the ideology of counter-jihadism in Europe (as well as beyond it), which is espoused by a fair number of populist actors, has the potential to amplify—and lends itself well to—the religious dimension of the discourse, owing to its apocalypticism and a narrative of salvation. After all, as the counter-jihadist narrative proclaims, the civilization that Europeans all belong to—whether articulated as “the West” or “Europe”—is under attack by a “totalitarian” Other called Islam. Against this background, the populist surge views its mission as a fight for the survival of civilization itself, and its politics acquires a transcendent nature. An expansive understanding of religion, in terms of a relationship with the sacred, shows that the path for “saving the people” is not exclusively a “hijacking of religion” but a transformation of politics itself into a tool for salvation here on earth.