

# The Populist Pope?: Politics, Religion, and Pope Francis

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**Abstract:** While religion and democracy have been intertwined since World War II, scholars have made little of the connections between religion and populism, largely conceptualizing religion as a tool of populism. In this paper, however, I argue that Pope Francis’ deployment of Catholicism resists such instrumentalization by populist politics, and offers resources for political ills underlying populism. I show that Francis’ focus on the people allows him to capitalize on populist currents in global politics, while also reforming those currents into something more constructive than populism. I further explore how his political theology and institutional autonomy render his thought and example relatively impervious to appropriation by political actors.

At a campaign rally for the May 2019 European parliamentary elections, a leading Italian politician invoked the protection of Mary for Italy and himself. Singing the praises of Popes John Paul II and Benedict, he “brandished” a Rosary as he exhorted Europe to recover its Christian roots.

In a country where Catholicism’s political influence is on the wane, one might have expected the Catholic Church to welcome this public display of religion. Shortly thereafter, however, Italian Catholic leaders began criticizing it. As *AP* reports, the pope’s secretary of state warned that “invoking [God] for yourself is always very dangerous.” A leading papal adviser tweeted that “The exploitation of religion seems to know no decency.” An Italian magazine wrote that the incident “was the latest example of the exploitation of religion.”

But why this outrage? What problem could the Italian Church have with politicians promoting religion in the public square?

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The answer is that the politician was Matteo Salvini, the deputy prime minister and a leading populist. While increasingly popular in Italy, many figures in the Italian Church reject his stance on immigration as anti-Christian. To such persons, Salvini's invocation of the Rosary and the protection of Mary thus seemed at best hypocritical, and at worst dangerously manipulative and exploitative of religion.

This Salvini episode highlights a common trope of our age: the marriage of populism and religion. Populists routinely invoke religious language and symbols, dividing society into a corrupt, evil elite and a pure, holy people. To that people, they offer "salvation," an "emancipation after a journey of sacrifice" (Marzouki and McDonnell 2016, 3). Populists, in other words, garb themselves in the robes of saviors.

While religion was celebrated for promoting the "Third Wave" of democratization and for aiding in the subsequent "global resurgence of civil society" (Huntington 1991; Casanova 2001), scholars have had little to say about its role vis-à-vis populism. To the extent that it has received scholarly attention, religion generally has been conceptualized as "almost entirely identitarian and negative" (DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 178). The title of a recent book, *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion*, suggests that researchers see religion primarily as a tool that populist leaders use to manipulate the people, much as many saw Salvini's display with the Rosary. Such studies leave little conceptual space for religion that could resist such co-optation by populism, and still more religion that could undermine or redirect populism.

In this paper, I argue that Pope Francis' deployment of Catholicism resists such instrumentalization by populist politics, and offers resources for political ills underlying populism. He thus unsettles several conventional wisdoms about religion and populism. Pope Francis argues that the key task of politics is building up a people as their own historical and cultural subjects. Pope Francis commits himself as a religious leader and the resources of the Church to a common project: the development of the people.

Francis' vision of politics responds to key issues around populism: the "boundary problem" of who counts as the people; performance issues of the gap between democratic ideals and democratic practice; and the moralistic language of populism.

I first present populism. I second explore Pope Francis' "political theology," arguing that the "people" are at the center of that thought. I do so through his 2013 text *Evangelii gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)*, which has been called a "charter" of his pontificate that captures many

of his key themes (Pentin 2018). I third show how Pope Francis' political thought engages with populism, as well as how it resists co-option by populism. I conclude by suggesting two variables key to the study of populism and religion.

## POPULISM

Populism is difficult to study for the same reason it is important to study: it "poses fundamental questions that are difficult, and to a certain extent impossible, to solve in a democracy," (Rovira Kaltwasser 2014, 470). The rise of populism raises questions about who "the people" are and how they are represented (Canovan 2004); the proper relationship between democracy and the constellation of things that gets called "liberalism," itself another contested term (Weyland 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Isaac 2017); and the study of political phenomena involving both empirical and normative concerns (Rovira Kaltwasser 2014, 471). The ultimate question, of course, is whether populism is good or the "shadow side" of representative democracy, with some seeing it as a pathology (Rosanvallon 2008) and others as an emancipatory force within democracy (Laclau 2005).

For the purposes of this paper, we will think of populism as an ideology that pits the many, "the pure people," against the few, "the corrupt elite"; valorizes the "will of the people" that needs to be instantiated politically; and depends upon a charismatic strongman who claims to speak for the people. This third element is not as universal as the antinomy between the people and the elite, but it is part of popular depictions of populism in Latin America and of criticisms of Pope Francis (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 4; 62–78).

While we cannot definitively answer the questions raised by populism, we will consider a few dynamics that will bear upon our study of Pope Francis.

The rise of populism impinges upon issues of democratic performance: is the state serving the people? Scholars often see at the root of populism a gap between expectations for democracy and its reality (Müller 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser 2014). That gap has special significance for democracy, as no other regime claims to rule both for and by the people, and no regime form has ever been held to such high expectations. The question of performance, then, becomes a question of hope and happiness of the people.

This gap bears upon exclusion: who benefits in society, and who is excluded. For that matter, who is the people? While many political scientists take for granted the existence of a people, populism underscores that every political order makes decisions about who counts and who does not. Further, even within the bounds of “the people” the word can be used to differentiate still further who counts and when: “By immemorial tradition, ‘people’ (like *populus* and *demos* before it) has meant both the whole political community and some smaller group with in it,” (Canovan 2004, 249). That smaller group can include the poor or *plebs*, or the *ethnos*, some sort of nation. In this respect, populism came to be seen as a call for “bringing the people back in.” But the ambiguity of the term “people” is deep.

Populists claim to represent the will of the people in a way that no one else can: they reject the legitimacy of any political opponents. This claim “is not an empirical one; it is always distinctly *moral*” (Müller 2016, 3). Populism often has “quasi-religious” overtones due to its emphasis on the sanctity of “the people” and the “moral seriousness” with which the populist leader takes up the cause to liberate them from evil elites (DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 179–80). Moreover, while languages of reform are common in politics, this moral dimension of populism offers something more: it promises a return to genuine politics, a rejection of the mundane that will somehow elevate us into the “absolute” or sacred (Lynch 2012).

This “moralistic” language makes an agreement and compromises impossible (Rovira Kaltwasser 2014, 481). It also unleashes moral and spiritual energies that Western democratic politics are not equipped to handle. Pope Francis’ religious message, I will argue, can do so.

Religion’s role in populism tends to be conceptualized as “identitarian and negative”: as an identity more than a system of belief, and that identity primarily as a term of exclusion of others (DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 178). Moreover, the populist subscription to religion is often a “bricolage”: selecting aspects of the religion that serve its purpose. Roy describes France’s *Front National*, for instance, as employing Catholicism as an identity that distinguishes the virtuous people from the impure “other,” especially Muslim immigrants; but rejecting much Church teaching, including on immigration and *laïcité*. Here religion plays a passive role: politicians have full agency in deploying religion as they see fit for political purposes (DeHanas and Shterin 2018, 177).

Several features of populism and religion make their marriage convenient for populists. Populism is a “thin” ideology, and seeks “thicker”

worldviews to flesh out its vision and program for action (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Religion offers such a thick vision. Religion is a powerful identity, and the redemptive aspirations of populism make religious languages of salvation and judgment attractive to it (Marzouki and McDonnell 2016, 2). Echoing a common sentiment, Palaver urges that ours is an age of fear and that religion and populism “both relate strongly to fear” (Palaver 2019, 22).

Moreover, the historical conditions of the West make it easy for populists to claim the mantle of Christianity against the secularism of elites and the Islam of many immigrants, as Salvini does in the case of Italy. Religion can thus serve to structure a political vision with both vertical distinctions between elites and the people, and horizontal between insiders and outsiders (Brubaker 2017, 1,192).

But must religion always be a passive instrument in the hands of populist leaders? In Pope Francis one finds an example of a religious leader who both resists such co-option and provides resources for many of the ills that plague democracy.

## THEOLOGY OF THE PEOPLE

In this section, I turn to Pope Francis’ political thought. While politics is not the primary interest of Pope Francis, his thought has considerable political implications, however, with the concept of “the people” at its center (Rourke, 133–4). In key respects, the thought of past popes buttresses his focus on the people.

The “faithful people of God” is at the heart of Pope Francis’ theological vision and his program as pope. This vision concerns the earthly attempt for individuals to struggle for liberation from obstacles to “becoming a people” (*EG*, §220).

Francis takes much of his conceptual framework for the “faithful people of God” from the theology of the people. The *teología del pueblo* is a school of Argentinian thought focused on the liberation of the people, seeing the people as agents of religion and politics and as a key locus for theological and political reflection. Pushing against liberal and Marxist accounts of the people as passive objects of exogenous forces, theology of the people sees the people as “subjects of history and culture,” and, in the case of religion, “both recipient and agents of evangelization” (Scannone 2016, 120). The people seek liberation for living out justice and peace in their own historical and cultural idiom.

Theology of the people takes culture more than class as its unit of analysis, arguing that people are formed through history and that people move toward their common good in history.

The “popular piety” of the poor is ultimately rooted in a universal faith (Rourke 2016, 56–7). The varied manifestations of piety across the world, however, show that each people must incarnate that faith in their own culture (EG, §122). Pope Francis’ great devotion to Mary as Our Lady Untier of Knots, for instance, captures both the universal devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, but also the way in which the situation of the Argentine people leads them to celebrate in a particular way her compassion and mercy. The processions, pilgrimages, and other public acts of devotion of popular piety also give faith public and peaceful expression (EG, §124). In this way, it resists the “privatization” of faith while also recognizing the contribution of each faith community (EG, §255).

Like any people-centered theory, theology of the people must address the ambivalence of the term “the people” (Canovan 2004). Theology of the people seeks to include “the entire people as a nation,” and in that respect is inclusive. It is the poor, however, who best “retain the very culture of their people as a structuring principle for everyday life and common life,” particularly popular piety (Scannone 2016, 121). Elites, on the other hand, are likely to live in “abstract ideologies that do not match our reality,” Pope Francis points out, detached from the concrete historical experiences and religious faith of the people (Ivereigh 2015, 116). Thus the wisdom of the people appears again and again in the works of Pope Francis as “both vaccine and antidote” to ideology (Ivereigh 2015, 111). Here Francis does not mean “ideology” simply as a pejorative but as a criticism of a worldview that does not maintain a proper tension between realities and ideals.

The *teología del pueblo* offers a non-Marxist accent on the liberation of the people. Rather than dismissing popular religiosity as false consciousness or an opiate, theology of the people celebrates it as privileged access to living out the Gospel (Scannone 2016, 122–3). The poor do not throw off religion as oppressive, but rather “witness to and make evident the joy of evangelizing and of being missionary disciples” (Scannone 2016, 134).

Indeed, Francis’ vision of the people as the faithful people of God draws upon the “universal call to holiness,” the claim that all in the Church are imbued with a vocation to serve God. This vision of the Church rejects claims that the faith should be entrusted only to Church elites, or that religion oppresses and limits the poor. In so doing, it takes a less vertical and metaphysical view of the Church in favor of a

more horizontal and Scriptural view, understanding the Church primarily in terms of the equality of all believers before God rather than their inequality in relation to each other. This “call” was raised at Vatican II, a world-wide meeting of bishops that met from 1962 to 1965 and deeply impacted the Catholic Church (Casanova 2001; Hehir 2006). The embrace of this call led much of the Church to become “less political and more social,” seeking engagement with civil society rather than “intimate collaboration” with political authority (Hehir 2006, 108).

Francis’ attention to the liberation of the people also arises from the Church’s attention to “integral human development.” In the spirit of Vatican II’s focus on the “social,” the popes after Vatican II “vigorously asserted the connection between Christian faith and the pursuit of economic justice for all” (Deck 2005, 292). The Church took up issues of development, insisting that development be broader than merely economic, but the material, social and spiritual condition of the poorest around the globe (Dorr 2012, 155–78). That focus on the poor in turn meant a shift in the Church’s gaze from Europe and North America to the Global South (Deck 2005, 310). It is fitting that a pope from the Global South should carry that initiative forward.

The Pope’s letter *Evangelii gaudium* reflects powerfully this *teología del pueblo* (Scannone 2016, 126). Pope Francis therein makes care for the poor and excluded a central task of the faith: “We may not always be able to reflect adequately the beauty of the Gospel, but there is one sign which we should never lack: the option for those who are least, those whom society discards” (*EG*, §193). While “the people” paradigmatically means the poor and the excluded (*EG*, §48), Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium* highlights at several levels the prior unity of the people. First, he calls not for the destruction of the elites who dominate the poor but rather urges that “Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society” (*EG*, §187). The common good, in other words, should draw all together in the project of its achievement.

Second, Pope Francis emphasizes this differentiated unity at the global level. The world is far larger than anyone locale, and “We constantly have to broaden our horizons and see the greater good which will benefit us all” (*EG*, §235). The Pope thus rejects any exclusivist populism or nationalism. Yet he criticizes the “abstract, globalized universe,” offered by globalization (*EG*, §236). The pope proposes the polyhedron as a better model than the sphere for understanding the world: it “reflects the convergence of

all its parts... [but] preserves its distinctiveness” (*EG* §236). This “polyhedron” approach informs Pope Francis’ thinking on issues like immigration and displaced persons: “I exhort all countries to a generous openness which, rather than fearing the loss of local identity, will prove capable of creating new forms of cultural synthesis” (*EG*, §210).

Third, Pope Francis underlines the unity of all humans with the environment, what Christians call creation. Against a vision of the environment as a source of resources to be exploited by the few while the many bear the cost of environmental degradation, Pope Francis argues that “We humans beings are not only the beneficiaries but also the stewards of other creatures.” Indeed, the fate of all peoples is closely implicated with the fate of creation, such that “all of us, as Christians, are called to watch over and protect the fragile world in which we live, and all its peoples” (*EG*, §215). His notion of people is closely connected to a common good that is broad enough to include all of creation as the “common home” for all excluded people. Pope Francis is particularly hopeful that care for creation can be a privileged site of cooperation between peoples of all and no religion, precisely because it is our “common home” (*EG*, §257).

The centrality of the people means that the poor have to be liberated from oppression and exclusion. For this liberation to happen, however, the powerful have to be liberated, as well:

The great danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades (*EG*, §2).

For Pope Francis, the woes of our time are irreducibly spiritual: the moral blindness that allows us to “threaten the life and dignity of God’s people” through exploitation, exclusion, displacement, despoliation of creation, and so forth (*EG*, §51). Particularly, Pope Francis sees the relationship between the economy and the people as inverted, such that most people serve the marketplace: “Money must serve, not rule!” (*EG*, §57–8).

The solution to this problem is not only better theory, but renewed contact with the poor through God’s voice that calls us to help them and learn from them. As we noted above, the realities of the people are



an antidote to the abstractions of elites, ideologies that lead them to make people instrumental to goods. The mark of ideologies, then, is to abstract from reality and thus fracture the unity of the people. Returning to the experience of the people, then, is an engagement with realities in their concrete form, and an awareness of the common destiny that unites all persons.

While Francis' theology of the people offers an analysis of "the people," we have seen also his development of the notion of "elites." While Francis uses the term to refer to those in political power, he has a certain relationship to power in mind (Scannone 2016, 124). As we have seen, for Francis elites tend to be intellectually and existentially removed from reality: they impose their own ideologies on reality, living in centers far from peripheries. This intellectually distancing from reality tempts them into allusions of mastery and control over themselves, nature and others. In *Laudato si'*, for example, Pope Francis describes one such ideology as "the technocratic paradigm": "This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object" (*LS*, §106). They imagine with their technological prowess they can reshape society, politics, and the economy in this fashion (*LS*, §109). This is dangerous given the tremendous technological advancements of the modern era, Francis argues: "In whose hands does all this power lie, or will it eventually end up? It is extremely risky for a small part of humanity to have it" (*LS*, §104). Francis has an answer:

The principal author, the historic subject of this process, is the people as a whole and their culture, and not a single class, minority, group or elite. We do not need plans drawn up by a few for the few, or an enlightened or outspoken minority which claims to speak for everyone. It is about agreeing to live together, a social and cultural pact (*EG*, §239).

Pope Francis thinks that all people of good will can adopt his message, but there is no question that the source of that message for him is divine. He proposes that "Our faith in Christ, who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast, is the basis of our concern for the integral development of society's most neglected members" (*EG*, §186).

Indeed, "the people" is a fundamentally theological category for Pope Francis. They are not constituted by politics or by elites: they are constituted by God. While for Francis a people are formed through history, they are a people moving toward their common good in history: friendship with

God. They are called into communion with him, which includes a relationship with other people. Here there is a discourse of equality: we are all equal and we must work to build unity. But there is also a discourse of obedience: we must respect God's desire for us to live in love and service.

A favorite example of this dynamic for Pope Francis is the calling of Matthew. When Jesus summons Saint Matthew the Apostle to his service, for Pope Francis the critical move is expressed by a Latin line that Francis took as his motto: *Miserando atque Eligendo*, or "Having mercy on and choosing." Jesus looks at Matthew, a tax collector and therefore a social outcast, with mercy, and that mercy compels Jesus to befriend Matthew. That friendship in turn re-establishes right relation between Matthew and God (Francis 2013a). In like manner, Francis sees human community on earth as a progressive realization, halting and ambiguous, of our recognition that humans whatever their flaws are looked upon God with mercy, and thus chosen to be part of God's people.

These ideas come together for Pope Francis in the notion of Church. Pope Francis seeks a humble but critical role for the Church. He refers to the Church as a "field hospital" (Francis 2013a). In the field hospital, one has to identify who is most hurt, and attend to their most urgent needs. Someone who is "seriously injured" needs to be treated for that injury, not for "high cholesterol." In the same way, Pope Francis urges the Church to care for the most urgent needs of the people. In laying out this vision, Francis excludes a Church more concerned with maintaining its rules, institutions, and culture than reaching beyond itself to care for the genuine needs of those "beyond" it (*EG*, §27). Part of this humility, then, is a Church willing to adapt itself to the concrete needs of the faithful. Institutional reform is not genuine, Francis argues with the French theologian Yves Congar, unless it arises from and attends to the experiences of the "ordinary faithful" (Ivireigh 2015, 93–4).

Pope Francis argues that the Church can benefit society: it can be the place where the poor, marginalized, and excluded are affirmed and re-incorporated into civil society. Pope Francis frequently calls for a "Church of the poor": "I want a Church which is poor and for the poor" (*EG*, §198). He believes that the Church can help liberate the poor by seeing them as part of the people, not just as people over there to be served. They are at the center of the Church, which is a way to see them as at the center of society itself. Francis' characterization of the Church ultimately reflects his prioritization of time over space: he would rather the Church initiate community-building processes in time rather than attempt to occupy or defend its own "space," meaning

privilege or authority. In short, the Pope's message is irreducibly religious: "...at the very heart of the Gospel is life in community and engagement with others" (*EG*, §177). Pope Francis' political theology of the people can "serve as a 'force multiplier' for important social and political goods" (Duffy Toft, Philpott, and Samuel Shah 2011, 216).

This accent on the common destiny of humanity connects Pope Francis' teaching closely with that of other popes, a point that helps bring out a crucial fact: for Francis, the relations between people within and across societies are not just instrumental goods, but *in se* goods. While civil society tends to be seen as instrumentally useful for checking the power of family and state (Levy 2015), for Catholic Church that social life perfects humans' material, rational and spiritual natures (Hittinger 2007, 274–83). Francis would urge more strongly than other popes, however, that each civil society must express the particular cultures of its people. This is the power of the polyhedron.

## FOUR PRINCIPLES

In *Evangelii Gaudium* Francis outlines four principles crucial to his political theology (Borghesi 2018, 57–68). These four principles are intended to "guide the development of life in society and the building of a people where differences are harmonized within a shared pursuit" (*EG*, §221). The four principles are: "Time is greater than space" (*EG*, §§222–225); "Unity prevails over conflict" (*EG*, §§226–230); "Realities are more important than ideas" (*EG*, §§231–233); and "The whole is greater than the part" (*EG*, §§234–237). I will briefly lay out his explanation of each of these principles.

"Time is greater than space" means "being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces." An emphasis on space leads to "madly attempting to keep everything together in the present, trying to possess all the spaces of power and of self-assertion; it is to crystallize processes and presume to hold them back" (*EG* §223). This desire for "immediate results" bears a clear connection to the elites Pope Francis castigates for seeking to impose their ideologies on the people. Instead, the pope urges us "to work slowly but surely" in ways that engender "processes of people-building." The principle dictates taking the long view, engaging historical and cultural processes with an eye toward allowing others to share and participate in power.

“Unity prevails over conflict” rests upon the principle of solidarity: “a principle indispensable to the building of friendship in society.” With this principle Pope Francis affirms the importance of diversity, and advocates for “a resolution which takes place on a higher plane and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides” (EG, §228). Ultimately, only “the unity brought by the Spirit can harmonize every diversity” (EG, §230). This appeal to unity resonates with Pope Francis’ understanding of the people, which as we saw earlier is not only the poor or the elites but everyone in reconciled harmony.

The third principle, that “Realities are more important than ideas,” has a special resonance in the pope’s thought. Pope Francis speaks against “laboratories” where political realities are domesticated by the abstract concerns of elites (Francis 2013a). Those laboratories produce ideologies that fail to capture the lived experience of a people. As Francis argues here, “Realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out.” He thus calls for a “continuous dialogue between the two,” such that ideas can always remain “at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis” (EG, §232).

Finally, “the whole is greater than the part.” We have already adverted to this principle in terms of the “innate tension” in globalization. Here Pope Francis sees the necessity of balancing reality and ideas to avoid ideology: globalization like any vision of the whole can offer an “abstract, globalized universe” with little reference to reality (EG, §236). It is in this context that the pope proposes the polyhedron as a model for understanding the world: it “reflects the convergence of all its parts... [but] preserves its distinctiveness” (EG, §236).

These principles reflect Pope Francis’ emphasis on the tensions involved in confronting the reality of the people in the attempt to build them up. They will be crucial to exploring his engagement with populism.

## POPE FRANCIS THE POPULIST?

Pope Francis’s thought *prima facie* appears similar to populism. Indeed, he places “the people” at the center of his political analysis, seeing them as oppressed and excluded by the few. He is a charismatic leader who deploys his considerable personal characteristics at the service of his reform agenda (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 62). Indeed, some have suggested that Pope Francis is himself a populist (Gregg 2017). It is more accurate, however, to argue that Pope Francis deploys

the resources of his religion in response to many of the same social and political pressures that animate populists, but in ways that invert the typical patterns of populism. As he said in 2018: “This is the only populism possible... listen and serve the people, without shouting, accusing and causing disputes” (Francis 2018).

In this section, I highlight three ways in which Francis offers resources for democracies under populist pressures. First, he pushes back against the boundary problem. Second, he reconceptualizes unity and representation through moral language. Third, he offers a new style of leadership. In each way, he responds to “moralistic” language and aspirations not with aseptic technocratic solutions, but genuinely moral language and aspirations (Müller 2016, 75–99).

As we noted above, every democracy must contend with Dahl’s “boundary problem”: who counts as part of “the people?” While Pope Francis cannot dispose of the practical questions raised by the boundary problem, he can offer spiritual energies to resist the tendency to treat a part of the people as the whole of the people, and demonize some other part as the “pernicious enemy” of the people (Weyland 2001, 11). He offers a “holism,” in other words, that is genuinely holistic.

Much of populism agrees with elitism in proposing an “either/or”: either the elites are the people, or the *plebs* or *demos* is the people. Pope Francis proposes a “both/and”: both are the people, and the *plebs* in a special way. In this way, he relies upon his principle of the priority of the whole over the part, and unity over conflict.

As we have seen, Pope Francis seeks to unite all persons in the struggle for the common good. That is a project rooted in God creating and choosing humans as Jesus chose Saint Matthew. While all are equal before God, not all share equally in the goods of the earth. Thus, for Pope Francis, the “people” paradigmatically means the poor and the excluded. He argues, however, that this division is wrong not because the people should dominate the elites, but because such exclusion wounds the unity of the people prior to and deeper than any division. Pope Francis offers a “new social contract” on the basis of a society’s shared humanity (Müller 2016, 99).

The unity of the people extends to all nations. At the global level, Francis advances the image of the polyhedron, which “reflects the convergence of all its parts... [but] preserves its distinctiveness” (*EG* §236). Religion no longer serves to build insuperable horizontal and vertical divisions (Brubaker 2017, 1,192).

Pope Francis has described this “convergence” in terms of “a culture of encounter,” and he regularly exercises it. In 2019, for instance, he has used

his travels as stages to protest the European, and especially the Italian, treatment of minority groups. In March 2019 Francis traveled to Morocco where he lamented the difficulties of Muslim immigrants seeking safety and jobs in Europe, arguing that “the side of the border on which a migrant stands does not make him or her more or less human” (Francis 2019). This was in line with his 2013 statements on Lampedusa, where he decried the inhumanity of European immigration policies. In May 2019, Francis used a visit to Romania to meet with Romani or “Gypsy” people, where he preached against the exclusion of Romani people from European society, after lamenting their similar treatment in Italy as “second-class citizens” (Giangravè 2019).

To be sure, this “culture of encounter” has antecedents in previous popes. In 1964 Pope Paul VI met with the Orthodox patriarch of Constantinople in 1964 to end the “Great Schism” of 1054 that separated Eastern and Western Christianity; in 1968 John Paul II became the first pope ever to visit a synagogue; and Benedict XVI visited Turkey in 2006 and Lebanon in 2012 as part of his dialogue with Islam. But few popes have used this tool so pointedly and consistently.

In short, Pope Francis offers a vision of the whole that is not formed by rejecting parts. To make actual the whole over the parts involves recognizing conflict and seeing possibilities for overcoming it. As we have seen repeatedly, Pope Francis urges a renewed attention to the poor that will convert elites. Pope Francis speaks endlessly of the poor, the marginalized, the excluded. When elites do begin to listen to the cry of the poor, he argues, it takes them beyond their “own interests and concerns” (EG, §2). When they encounter the poor, they encounter God, and so “are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption” (EG, §8).

Müller argues for an alternative to populism “that seeks to bring in those currently excluded... while also keeping the very wealthy and powerful from opting out of the system” (Müller 2016, 99). Pope Francis offers such an alternative: any division between the people and elites should not be exacerbated by excluding the elites from the people, but by seeking reconciliation in the name of the deeper unity that unites the people.

Second, Pope Francis offers resources against the gap in democratic practice. The “crucial promise” of democracy is “that the people can rule” (Müller 2016, 76). This gap between the ideal and the real in democracy, in other words, in part makes plausible the division of society into a pure people and an evil elite (Rovira Kaltwasser 2014, 484). Thus, one of the surest ways to ameliorate this gap between practice and ideal is a vision

we have just discussed: the people as united in the project of reconciliation, not as divided between elites and people. Further resources come from Pope Francis' principles of ideas versus realities and time over space.

First, ideas versus realities. Here Pope Francis has advice for elites. The gap between democratic ideals and practices can be exacerbated when the gap is understood through ideological discourse, with little reference to the lived reality of those involved. In *Laudato si'*, for example, he argues that global elites, "being located in affluent urban areas, are far removed from the poor, with little direct contact with their problems" (*LS*, §49). Elites are thus able to treat the people as a distant and abstract problem. Francis calls for a "continuous dialogue" between the two, such that ideas can always remain "at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis" (*EG*, §231–2).

The priority of realities over ideas also applies to "the people." A common component of populism is the assumption that the populist leader can easily and quickly enact the will of the people: they simply need to be empowered (Müller 2016, 32–4). When populist leaders offer quick-fix solutions to social, economic, and political ills, Francis would urge the people to question whether those policies are in fact attuned to the complex realities of the world. Perhaps, instead, they are yet another set of abstractions foisted upon the people by elites seeking power. In such a case, the people should resist any ideologies that are out of touch with reality and a source of division.

This gap between ideals and practices also bears upon Francis' priority of time over space. This priority means that society should be built through "initiating processes rather than possessing spaces." When conflict emerges in society, social and political actors should resist the desire to replace elites by occupying the space they have held. Francis urges the weak and oppressed to avoid reproducing the sins of the powerful by claiming the spaces of authority and violence, but rather to enter into processes that build up the whole people over time. They should thus resist the siren call of those who would occupy the space of elites in their own name.

Pope Francis ultimately relies upon time over space because he trusts in the slow work of God. As God creates people, so God unites them in his own way and time. For this reason, Christianity resists seeing the end of time as within history: somehow the fulfillment of human activity occurs beyond time as we know it. That does not mean that human time has no meaning. It does mean, however, that human activity operates in a temporal state of ambiguity: humans do not achieve, and should not



expect to achieve, the fullness of their purposes and goals (Kraynak 2001, 269–273). In that light, politics does not appear as the place to realize complete happiness.

The question of time underscores the hopes we place in a democracy. Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau criticized Christianity for refusing to place its final hope in politics (Rousseau 1762, IV.8.15). In light of risks posed to liberal democracy today, however, that moderation of expectations might be quite useful. Christianity moderates expectations for what we can achieve, and denies that we can somehow attain salvation through politics. It denies that we can attain total self-mastery through power. In the end, the *pueblo fiel de Dios* are of God, not of politics.

Third, Pope Francis offers an alternative model of leadership to populism. In Francis one finds the exemplar of a popular and charismatic leader who does not embrace populism, but rather transcends it (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 4).

Francis is a charismatic and popular leader, with an 84% approval rating among U.S. Catholics.<sup>1</sup> He is the first pope with an Instagram account, with over 6 million followers. He has traveled to 45 countries in his first 6 years as pope, including holding the largest papal Mass in history, with approximately 6–7 million people in Manila.

As pope, he benefits from traditions of respect and devotion from the Catholic faithful. His security in this position allows him to be humble. Indeed, where others embrace an aura of power, he cultivates an image of simplicity and humility. He is a servant. This image began from the way he introduced himself to the world upon his election: before giving the traditional first blessing of the pope, he asked the people of Rome to first bless him (Ivereigh 2015). This simplicity continued in his way of life: living in the Vatican guesthouse rather than the papal apartments; his simple clothes and car; and his decisions to spend time with the poor rather than the powerful. Pope Francis navigates a paradox: in seeking to turn attention away from himself as the head of the Church, he has turned attention toward himself. Yet he thereby shows the power of humility and simplicity.

Pope Francis' style has attracted criticism within the Catholic Church in part because of the questions it raises about the proper orientation of the Church to the world. Since the 1960s, the Church has argued about what kind of updating (*aggiornamento*) of its teaching is necessary in light of contemporary conditions. For many Catholics, Pope Francis has found arresting ways to present vital Church teachings on mercy, love, and forgiveness. For others, Francis has obscured central teachings in



his efforts to accommodate the Gospel to the world. This is not a controversy that will go away soon. But we can note that Pope Francis, like all popes, makes choices about the parts of the Gospel he wants to accent. We will explore this shortly with respect to the “hierarchy of truth.”

The challenge for those who would resist populism is to “move beyond reflexive hostility... and define a proactive and constructive strategy” (Weyland and Madrid 2019, 27). Pope Francis does this. In his people-centered theology, he responds directly to the desires of global politics today without giving in to “us versus them” dynamics. A key dimension of his approach is a morality that matches the moral aspirations of populism. A common response to populism is to offer technical explanations for why populist policies are irrational or ineffective, to defend the procedures that make liberalism function. Yet a “thick” moral language can address the frustration with such proceduralism, a frustration that leads to the moral impetus behind populism. This thick moralism is a resource seemingly not possessed by contemporary liberalism (Müller 2016, 75–99).

In this way, we may be bumping into the problem posed by Habermas (2008) in his recent work, namely that liberal democracy depends in its pre-political foundations on Christian norms of human dignity and rights. As indicated by the title of his 2008 book, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, Habermas suggests that religious and naturalistic outlooks should cooperate on common projects of peace and justice. In light of that view, Pope Francis is not simply an avuncular humanist, but a challenge to many liberals to reconsider their hesitation or refusal to cooperate with religious actors in politics.

## RELIGION AND POPULISM: RESISTING CO-OPTATION

Pope Francis offers powerful resources for democracies under populist stress. His example, moreover, contrasts powerfully with cases in which religion is selectively co-opted by political agents. While religious actors cannot remove completely the agency of politicians to co-opt aspects of their message, we have identified aspects of Francis’ teaching that render co-optation more difficult.

First, Pope Francis resists his message being treated as an exclusionary identity or a menu for bricolage. We saw that populism tends to instrumentalize select aspects of Christianity (Roy 2016). Pope Francis is sensitive to this danger, arguing that “the message we preach runs a greater risk of being distorted or reduced to some of its secondary aspects” (*EG* §34).

Pope Francis resists this selective reading by invoking the “hierarchy” of truths in Catholicism (*EG* §37). In choosing how to present its message to the world, the Church “has to concentrate on the essentials,” thus “giving direct expression to the heart of the Gospel.” That central message is the love and mercy of God, and the recipient is the poor: “there is one sign which we should never lack: the option for those who are least, those whom society discards” (*EG*, §193). That core message is unambiguous because it is simple, “while losing none of its depth and truth” (*EG* §34–5).

Stressing the roots of the Catholic message makes it less likely that a political leader could weaponize part of it for his own benefit. Further, this message is resistant to being used in an exclusionary way. Its imperative is fundamentally relational and open to the excluded and marginalized: “We have to state, without mincing words, that there is an inseparable bond between our faith and the poor. May we never abandon them” (*EG* §48). The “hierarchy” is not only a question of what to teach but to whom: Pope Francis’ message is primarily for and about the poor and excluded.

Second, Pope Francis offers this teaching not simply in words but in actions. These actions have the benefit of attracting media attention. Mass media plays an important role in the diffusion of populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017); Pope Francis attracts similar attention to his activities. When Pope Francis traveled to Lampedusa in 2013, a Mediterranean island near where many immigrants had died crossing from North Africa to Europe, for instance, he was not offering a new teaching on immigration. Rather, he was finding a new and powerful way to teach by witness. Indeed, he himself said, “I felt that I had to come here today, to pray and to offer a sign of my closeness, but also to challenge our consciences lest this tragedy be repeated” (Francis 2013c).

Actions are not as easily appropriated as words. They are more immediate, making their interpretation harder to spin. Actions are also widely transmittable by social media, making their diffusion harder for potential co-opters to control. Finally, actions are often perceived as more genuine or authentic than words. Populists can dismiss statements of elites as idle words. They cannot do so as easily with actions.

A third factor that makes Francis more impervious to co-option is unique: he is the ruler of a sovereign state. The Vatican’s differentiation from any political authority enables Francis’ complex relation with populism. As he is an absolute monarch with no electoral incentives constraining his political behavior, he is insulated from democratic pressures that

might lead him to adopt more conventional populist ideologies (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017, 79–96). The existence of the Vatican City State as a sovereign entity allows Francis to cooperate with other actors toward common projects, free from coercion (Rommen 2016, 469–78). Pope Francis has a disarming way of speaking in a direct and relevant way, and there is no question that he has unusual freedom to do this. The Pope operates in a unique milieu whose advantages he deploys effectively.

Pope Francis has operated more discreetly under different circumstances, a background that has prepared him for this resistance to co-optation. The Argentinian Church has been subject to the state across numerous regimes, particularly during the “Dirty Wars” (Klaiber 1998, 66–91). As the leader of the Argentinian Jesuits, Pope Francis was constrained by the Argentine Church’s integration with the state, and some assume he supported the military regime (Ivereigh 2015, 134–6; Rourke 2016, 69, fn 16). Yet then-Father Bergoglio did what he could to limit the negative impact of the violence, discreetly protecting the lives of the Jesuits under his care and helping victims of the state (Ivereigh 2015, 137). Later, as archbishop of Buenos Aires, Francis had more authority to direct church attitudes toward political authority, embracing a cooperative relationship between the two. In 2002, for instance, he helped to facilitate the *Diálogo Argentino*, a 7-month long forum in which political, social, and economic actors came together to “save Argentina from disaster by shoring up civil society” (Ivereigh 2015, 268–71). Within these proceedings the Argentinian Church through Bergoglio “offer[ed] space for dialogue” between others, rather than seeking to secure its own interests (Ivereigh 2015, 269).

Pope Francis is not a populist, but there is a demand for his people-centered message, a demand that dovetails with populism. It is perhaps naive to hope that Francis’ message can be deployed to redirect all the dangerous political phenomena of our time. Ultimately, however, Pope Francis offers the possibility of resources beyond politics that can be of service to the common life of citizens.

## CONCLUSION

Religions can support or reject populist politics. In this way, populism reflects the “ambivalence of the sacred” in modern politics (Appleby 1999). I have considered Catholicism and Pope Francis because it is the

religion I know best. Political scientists do not study popes or the Vatican a great deal (exceptions include Reese 1996, O'Rourke 2016, Stormvoll 2018). It is my hope that this paper can contribute to strengthening that research agenda.

Other religions deserve similar attention. In considering them, we have recourse to two important variables: political theology and institutions (Philpott 2007).

For some, "political theology" means Carl Schmitt's notion of a full political ideology and regime form springing directly from revelation (Gray 2007). In studying religions, what is their relationship to reason? When and how do they engage in debates of public importance? Pope Francis offers the possibility of a "political theology" with a reach beyond the membership of the Catholic Church, one in dialogue with reason and universal themes and values. He thus denies that religion must be an irrational force of violence and exclusion (Stark and Finke 2000, 28–9).

Further, it can be easy to speak generically of "religion." But how are they institutionally incarnated? And in what relation do they stand to political authority (Driessen 2010)? Within Catholicism, the Church operates through many agents and in a wide variety of relationships with political authority (Fox 2008). A fuller account of the Catholic Church's political engagement might model it as a transnational network operating at multiple levels (Hehir 2006, 94–101). Part of that account would include the ways in which Vatican II and Pope Francis have empowered national and local levels of Catholicism to operate with greater freedom (Hehir 2006, 100).

These two variables can tell us much about how likely religions are to be co-opted by political actors. Populism is one ideology, but many ideologies attempt to co-opt religion. Many in the United States, for instance, argue that the two major political parties co-opt different aspects of Church teaching, rejecting other parts. Scholars with an intimate knowledge of particular religions can identify how those religious actors and beliefs can be of benefit to public life without becoming the tool of ideology.

The future of liberal democracy remains uncertain. Pope Francis makes it clear, however, that religion can play a positive role in rejecting the many political "processes of dehumanization" of our time, and in offering robust alternatives (*EG*, §51). Francis thus invites us into Habermas' post-secular world, in which religion and reason must begin anew their common task of service to public life.

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## NOTES

1. The Pew Research Center has tracked Pope Francis' approval ratings. See, e.g., <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/06/facts-about-how-u-s-catholics-see-pope-francis/> and <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/18/favorable-u-s-views-pope-francis/>. His popularity dropped after the 2018 clerical sex abuse scandals: <http://www.pewforum.org/2018/10/02/confidence-in-pope-francis-down-sharply-in-u-s/>

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