Politics and Religion (2024), **17**, 684–685
doi:10.1017/S1755048324000257

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

BOOK REVIEW

The Godless Crusade: Religion, Populism and Right-Wing Identity Politics in the West

By Tobias Cremer. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 350 pp. $29.99 paperback.

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Why do right-wing populist movements in largely secularized polities so often claim to be staunch defenders of Christianity or Judeo-Christian values? Why should Donald Trump, a man who when asked for his favorite Bible verse could think of none other than "an eye for an eye," claim to be a defender of Christianity in the United States when he must be among the least religious presidents in American history? And why should Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch right-wing populist Party for Freedom, claims to be protecting Judeo-Christian and Humanist values from political "elites" and Muslim immigrants when he is a secularist and an agnostic?

These are some of the questions addressed in Tobias Cremer's book *The Godless Crusade: Religion, Populism and Right-Wing Identity Politics in the West* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023), a well written and welcome addition to the literature addressing the relationship between religion and populism.

The book begins with the somewhat outdated claim that many scholars and commentators believe that a religious resurgence is responsible for right-wing populism's increasing use of Christian iconography and language (p. 3). Rather there exists today something close to a scholarly consensus that the rise of right-wing populism in Western Europe—and perhaps also in the United States—has little to do with a religious resurgence, and that the Christian or Judeo-Christian values populists purport themselves to be defending are entirely different from authentic Christian beliefs, and most often stand for a kind of confused cultural Christianity that is sure of nothing other than it is *not* Islam and—increasingly—not *woke*.

For example, in 2013 Olivier Roy observed that religion and culture were increasingly disconnected in Europe which was confused about its identity, and that it was now possible for an ethnic European atheist to identify as culturally Christian, because "even if the identity of Europe is Christian, it is no longer a religious identity because faith has left" ("Secularism and Islam: The theological predicament," in *Europe and Islam*, Routledge, 2018). And in a much-cited 2017 article, Rogers Brubaker described right-wing populists in "north-West Europe" as Christianist, or practicing Christian identity politics, rather than genuinely Christian parties

("Between nationalism and civilizationism: the European populist moment in comparative perspective," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40, no. 8, 2017).

Cremer's book examines right-wing populist movements in France (National Rally), the United States (the Trump movement), and Germany (Alternative for Germany), all secularized (to different degrees and according to different notions of secularism) nations but which nonetheless possess strikingly different political and religious histories. He makes a similar argument to the major literature on the topic. However, unlike most other books on religion and the populist right, *The Godless Crusade* deepens our understanding of what we might call Christian identity populism through nuanced analysis and a rigorous method. Indeed, Cremer has interviewed over 100 populist leaders and untaken extensive analysis—itself a useful contribution. Equally, Cremer is also interested in the *demand* side of right-wing populism, which sets him apart from most scholars who examine the supply side (i.e., populist leader discourse). The Godless Crusade is thus at its best when it examines why people are drawn to right-wing populist parties, leaders, and movements that promise to defend Christian and Judeo-Christian values.

Cremer's key finding is that the decline of the old religious right is creating a new identitarian right, which is both divorced from the old religion but feels a nostalgic longing for the more homogenous past. He finds "a transformative shift in the balance of power in Western right-wing movements. Rather than being dominated by religiously defined culture wars, the new right is increasingly driven by a more secular but no less radical identitarian struggle for Western Civilisation …in which Christianity is turned into a secularised 'Christianism', an ethno-cultural identifier of the nation and a symbol of whiteness that is increasingly independent of Christian practice, beliefs and the institution of the church" (p. 7).

Thus, the new identitarian right, because it is largely irreligious, draws support from non-religious white Americans and European who feel alienated in multicultural societies, and especially alienated from the political left, which grows less interested in representing the interests of working-class whites and represents instead a coalition of ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities and professionals. The book makes a contribution by discussing the symbiotic relationship between left-wing and right-wing identity politics, arguing that left-wing identity politics encourages the development of "Christianist" right-wing identity politics, and vice-versa.

Cremer also discusses the spiritual decay of Western societies and observes that religious authorities often contribute to this by allowing right-wing populists to instrumentalize religion. Church leaders should reject right-wing populism, he suggests, even if they appreciate the seeming pro-Christian views of populist leaders because, ultimately, populist leaders do not serve Christian interests, but rather use terms such as Christianity or Judeo-Christianity to define the character of Western civilization. And it is Western civilization, as Cremer correctly observes, and not belief in the Christian God which they ultimately wish to "save" and "protect" from the left-wing activists and Muslims they believe desire its abolition.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048324000257 Published online by Cambridge University Press