

# The Brexit Religion and the Holy Grail of the NHS

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*The role of populism in mobilising support for Britain's withdrawal from the European Union has been well noted. But a key feature of populist politics – the use of religious discourses – has been largely overlooked. This article addresses this gap by exploring the way in which the Leave campaign framed Brexit in quasi-religious and mythological terms. Three core themes are identified: (1) that the British 'people' had a unique role to play in global affairs; (2) that the sanctity of this special status was threatened by elites and migrants; (3) that the referendum gave voice to the sacred 'will of the people'. These narratives were underpinned by a strategic discourse centring on claims that EU membership was exacerbating a crisis in health and social care. This myth was encapsulated by the so-called 'Brexit bus' campaign.*

**Keywords:** Populism, political myth, social policy, Brexit, NHS.

## Analysing Brexit

The UK's 2016 referendum decision to leave the European Union (or 'Brexit' as it has come to be known) was arguably the country's most disruptive political event since the Second World War. Unsurprisingly, this decision continues to be the subject of sizeable commentary and debate. Within these analyses it is widely recognised that populism played a pivotal role in mobilising support for the Leave campaign. Brexit is often seen as the result of 'a populist mindset' (Freeden, 2017) linked to 'a new nationalist populism in western Europe' (Gusterton, 2017). At the heart of such analyses is a recognition that Brexit exemplifies an era of post-truth politics (Hopkin and Rosamond, 2018) encapsulated by the promulgation of myths, fantasies and misinformation, stoking fears and false expectations amongst voters (Browning, 2019; Kettell and Kerr, 2019). Many such narratives have been employed to fuel anti-immigration and anti-establishment fervour (e.g. Hobolt, 2016; Dennison and Geddes, 2018; Virdee and McGeever, 2018).

Within this scholarship, debate exists around the balance between the 'cultural' and the 'economic' drivers of the current populist wave. For some, Brexit should be interpreted as a 'cultural backlash' against socially liberal values (Inglehart and Norris, 2016), or as an appeal to imperialist nostalgia (Clarke and Newman, 2017). Others view it as a reaction to the economic consequences of globalisation, neo-liberalism and austerity (Hopkin, 2017; Powell, 2017; Watson, 2018), whilst some have seen it as part of a wider backlash against 'modernisation' (Kerr et al., 2018). As such, Brexit provides an ideal case study for understanding the inner dynamics of populist discourse and tactics (Corbett, 2016; Ruzza and Pejovic, 2019).

One aspect that has been underexplored in these studies is the link between Brexit, populism and religion. What little research exists in this area has tended to approach the topic through the lens of religious views and voting behaviour in the referendum (e.g. Knowles, 2018; Smith and Woodhead, 2018), leaving wider questions about the constitution of religious and populist themes unaddressed. This is an unusual omission given the degree to which populist politicians around the world have openly drawn on religious tropes and motifs. Examples include the links between Donald Trump and the Christian Right in the United States (Whitehead *et al.*, 2018), the use of Christianity as an anti-Islamic identity marker by populists in Europe (e.g. Peace, 2016) and the rise of Hindu nationalism in India (Wojczewski, 2019). As Arato and Cohen (2017: 291) note, populist rhetoric has ‘an elective affinity with certain religious ideas or tropes’ (such as apocalyptic threats, the idea of a unique people and the need for salvation) and ‘religion is now playing an important role in the new populisms’. Or, as Mao (2017: 62) puts it: ‘One of the perplexing features of populist movements and ideologies is that, although they often unfold in a secular milieu, they have scarcely disguised religious connotations’.

In some ways this omission from the field of UK politics is an understandable one. The UK is a largely secularised society and religion exerts little overt control over public life. Nevertheless, our aim is here to show that crucial parts of the discourse surrounding Brexit were grounded in a number of quasi-religious tropes and mythical themes. The article explores these issues using a qualitative content analysis of the discourse used by prominent Brexit supporters during and after the referendum campaign. To examine this, the study compiled a dataset designed to capture the main sources of political debate and communication from Leave advocates. This dataset was centred principally on the UK’s official record of Parliamentary proceedings (Hansard), and involved more than one hundred debates, statements and questions relating to Brexit since the 2016 referendum. This corpus was supplemented by transcripts of speeches collected from the UKPOL political speech archive ([www.ukpol.co.uk](http://www.ukpol.co.uk)) and the official Vote Leave website (<http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org>), as well as reports collected by a comprehensive search of the media database, LexisNexus.

To identify common discursive frames, these data were subject to a qualitative content analysis. This is defined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005: 1278) as ‘a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes and patterns’. Data were analysed manually, and the discursive themes were revealed as an emergent property of the text, as opposed to being theoretically derived.

In what follows we explore three core discursive strategies employed by Leave campaigners. First is the idea that the British ‘people’ have a unique political, cultural and historical role to play in global affairs. The second is that the sanctity of Britain’s special status is under threat from European elites and an influx of foreign migrants. The third is that the EU referendum gave voice to the sacred ‘will of the people’, putting the implementation of Brexit beyond question. In these respects, Brexit was presented by the Leave campaign as a necessary path towards liberation from the clutches of Brussels, enabling the British people to fulfil their historic destiny as a global free-trading nation. At the same time, whilst such narratives remained largely metaphysical in their appeal, the benefits of Brexit were given more concrete expression through the strategic use of discourses around UK social policy. This was especially the case for the ‘Holy Grail’ of British politics, the National Health Service (NHS). This was directly linked to the case

for Brexit through a high-profile 'Brexit bus' campaign, signalling that an extra £350 million would be provided for the NHS each week if the UK voted to leave. This myth reinforced claims that public services were under siege from a combination of uncontrolled immigration and the financial cost of EU membership. As such, leaving the EU was presented as the necessary panacea for the failings of the UK's social care system.

This analysis makes a direct contribution to studies of Brexit, as well as to the growing body of work on the relationship between religion and populism, by showing how quasi-religious and mythical themes can be used to underpin a populist discourse. The rest of the article proceeds as follows. We begin by outlining the relationship between the spheres of politics and religion, highlighting some of the ways in which populism can draw on religious themes. We then move to examine the quasi-religious tropes and discursive myths that were recruited by the Leave campaign to mobilise support for Brexit. Finally, we show how these various elements were marshalled to stoke voters' fears and expectations around a perceived crisis in health and social care provision through the NHS 'Brexit bus' campaign.

### Populism and (secular) religion

The realms of the 'political' and the 'religious' have been deeply connected since the earliest forms of human society. For millennia, religious and mythical elements (such as the idea that rulers represented divine will or were divine themselves) provided the organising basis and legitimacy for the social order (Bellah, 1964). Importantly, as Habermas (2011: 17) notes, this legitimising power was understood as something that stood external to society itself. Thus: "Religion" owes its legitimizing force to the fact that it has its own roots, independently of politics'. During the last millennium, however, this relationship has experienced a fundamental transformation. The onset of functional differentiation, the autonomisation of social spheres and the secularisation of state authority from the eighteenth century led to the increasing privatisation and decline of religion and to the loss of an external anchor for political legitimacy. This disappearance of society's 'metasocial character' (ibid: 21) led to the development of new bases for social order and legitimacy in which the socially integrative role of religion was supplanted by secular concepts such as 'the nation', 'sovereignty' and 'the people'. Importantly, however, these concepts represented secular forms of ideas that were initially framed in theological terms, famously described by Schmitt (2005) as 'political theological concepts'. As Chibundu (2006: 134) explains, the notion of sovereignty is a concept 'as mystical and based on religious faith as are the notions of trinity and arianism'.

Thus, even under conditions of secularisation the organising principles and legitimising bases of political institutions 'are founded in never fully accessible metanormative structures — deep-seated, unconscious assumptions that without being normative themselves determine the meaning of truth, justice, law within a socio-political order as a whole' (Arato, 2013: 151). The boundaries between the secular and the religious spheres are often blurred, such that certain aspects of religion can be co-opted by the secular. Mavelli (2020) illustrates this with the rise of neoliberalism, a system requiring 'faith' in the efficacy of the free market that has become 'a quasi-religious authority' in most Western societies. In short, even in secularised contexts, religious themes continue to provide a useful governing resource for maintaining social order. As Maier (2007: 15) points out, 'religion does not allow itself to be easily banished from society, and that, where this is tried, it returns in unpredictable and perverted forms'.

Religious themes can become entwined with the secular in a variety of ways. These include 'political religions', a concept devised to explain totalitarian systems such as those in Fascist and Communist regimes based on leadership cults, mass rallies, national liturgies, the construction of political fantasy worlds and the overt worship of the state (see Gentile, 2005; Maier, 2007), 'civil religions', a term used to describe a transcendent moral basis for the political institutions, beliefs, rituals and symbols of the nation (e.g. Williams, 2013), and 'political myths', described by Della Sala (2010) as discursive projects designed to set 'the normative parameters of the nature of political authority and its use in a political community'. In this sense, political myths explain a collective history and set out the values that define a group of people as being distinct from others.

Religious themes also permeate nationalist and populist varieties of politics, characterised by the use of 'secularised theological concepts' such as 'the nation', 'the people' and 'sovereignty' (Arato, 2013). Both forms emphasise the need for faith in an external power, appeal to emotion over rational forms of judgement and are marked by the affectivity of ceremonial rituals and symbols of national life, the use of mythologised national histories and claims to represent a territorially and/or culturally unique group of people, typically in need of salvation to fulfil a manifest destiny (e.g. Santiago, 2009; Brubaker, 2012; Arato and Cohen, 2017; De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017; Mao, 2017; DeHanas and Shterin, 2018).

### The myths and religion of Brexit

A range of religious and mythological themes are visible in the case of Brexit. Critics of Brexit have frequently highlighted the way in which Leave campaigners indulged in a form of 'unicorn politics' (Sorkin, 2019) to persuade people that leaving the EU would fulfil a range of fantasies such as increased prosperity, political emancipation and lower levels of immigration (Browning, 2019). Some commentators have even drawn direct parallels to religion. Richard Dawkins has claimed that Brexit 'has become a religion now. It has become a faith. It has become a creed' (Humphreys, 2019). Jonathan Lis (2019) has described Brexit as a 'medieval state religion', casting its critics as 'apostates or heretics'. The Conservative Attorney General, Geoffrey Cox, described Brexit as 'an article of faith' (BBC News, 2019). One need not agree with the view that Brexit has become a religion to appreciate this critique. As Finlayson (2018) points out, the various components of 'Brexitism' are united by 'an underlying "metaphysics" – an image of the world linked with a belief in redemption . . . achieved by heroic resistance to a future imposed by alien and expert elites'.

These religious dimensions to Brexit were operationalised through three key discourses: the claim that the British people had an 'exceptional' status within Europe, a view of the EU as a nefarious threat to this status, and an insistence that the sacred 'will of the people' expressed in the referendum had to be obeyed. These discourses combined to frame Brexit as the road to a form of national salvation and historic destiny for the UK, while effectively placing it beyond the reach of intellectual, rational contestation.

#### *'The special status of the British people'*

These mythological narratives began with a repeated appeal to the legitimising role of 'the people' in driving the Brexit process. As Mao (2017: 66) points out, in populist discourse 'the people' are often presented as a 'quasi-religious notion' that opens the route 'to a

decline in concern for realism and an indulgence of irrational beliefs about social life'. For Brexiteers, one such belief, embedded within two centuries of British foreign policy, was that 'Britain is a European actor of an exceptional kind' (Daddow, 2015: 72), and, as such, Brexit was about 'restoring and enhancing the distinctive and exceptional aspects of the UK state' (Gamble, 2018: 10). This type of nativist appeal drilled into some of the core myths of British national identity (Smith, 1999), framing the 'British people' as having a unique global reach in terms of their language, culture, historical connections and geography. Such populist framing is typically offered 'as the birth of a straightforward cultural exclusivity that cannot be delegated, preceded or brushed aside, and that has propelled a given society on an irreversible path of preserving its unique properties in the face of continuous challenges' (Freeden, 2017: 4). For the UK, its own irreversible path was to set itself free from the EU in order to reconnect with its historic destiny as a leading, autonomous, global free trading nation.

Such a view was expressed in statements from prominent Leave campaigners such as David Davis (2016), Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, who claimed that the history of Europe 'is not our history ... the European Project is not right for us. The Global Project is'. The Conservative MP (and future Home Secretary) Priti Patel likewise claimed that leaving the EU would enable the UK to 'position ourselves as an outward-looking, global, free-trading country' (House of Commons (HC) Deb, 29 January 2019), enabling its people to 'choose our future and be in control of our destiny' (HC Deb, 29 March 2019). Boris Johnson (2018), the-then Foreign Secretary (and later Prime Minister), claimed that Brexit would be 'a manifestation of this country's historic national genius' and was 'about re-engaging this country with its global identity ... in keeping with Britain's deepest instincts and history'. The Conservative MP (and future Chairman of the influential, anti-EU, European Research Group), Mark Francois, claimed that being a global, free-trading nation was 'historically in our national DNA', and that Brexit would therefore enable the UK to 'take back full control of our national destiny' (HC Deb, 29 March 2017).

Such rhetoric also brings to the fore a quasi-mystical view of History as a teleological force. Thus, in reference to wider processes of globalisation, Boris Johnson (2016c) was able to claim that 'the European project is going against the tide of events and history'. By recognising this fact, the UK was uniquely placed to once again break the tyranny of regional protectionism and promote the spread of global free trade, a process which the Conservative MP (and future Foreign Secretary), Dominic Raab, claimed would directly benefit 'the poorest African nations, currently languishing under the yolk of hypocritical western protectionism' (HC Deb, 31 January 2017). In this way, Brexit would not only provide salvation for the British people but would become a platform for Britain to offer deliverance to other parts of the globe.

It is fair to say that such narratives of British exceptionalism 'were not the sole preserve of the Leave campaign. They had been the stock-in-trade of pro-EU British politicians for decades' (Daddow, 2018). The UK had long presented itself as an 'outsider' (Daddow, 2015), a reluctant or 'awkward partner' (George, 1994) and had used this awkwardness 'to carve out a privileged position for itself' (Menon and Salter, 2016: 1301) in the form of a number of opt-outs and exemptions from broader EU rules and mechanisms. At the heart of this idea of British exceptionalism was a construction of its identity as an island, set geopolitically apart from the rest of Europe, which had, through its unique buccaneering spirit, spawned its own vast Empire. Thus, 'Europe' in this tradition is a choice for Britain,

not a necessity' (Daddow, 2018). This idea of British exceptionalism has been particularly evident in the aftermath of the referendum, with a number of prominent Leave supporters echoing Boris Johnson's sentiment that the UK should 'have its cake and eat it' in terms of enjoying a range of unique benefits to other non-EU countries in its future relationship with the EU (Kettell and Kerr, 2019). As the journalist Jonathan Freedland put it, using a different culinary analogy, Britain has attempted to retain 'all the ice-cream of EU membership and none of the spinach' (Freedland, 2019).

### *'The EU as threat'*

Central to this construction of British exceptionalism was a view of the EU as an external, malign force posing an existential threat to the political and cultural traditions of the British people. Here the EU was portrayed as entrapping the UK within the bureaucratic and undemocratic structures of a federal superstate, locked into a failing economic model. According to Boris Johnson (2016a), the EU project was 'getting out of control', and that, in the 'effort to build a country called Europe ... The independence of this country is being seriously compromised'. The leader of the UK Independence Party, Nigel Farage (2016), claimed that the EU had 'by stealth, by deception, without ever telling the truth to the British or the rest of the people of Europe ... imposed upon them a political union'. The Conservative MP (and another future Chairman of the European Research Group), Jacob Rees-Mogg, described the EU as nothing less than 'an imperial yoke' (HC Deb, 21 October 2019). Thus, Leave campaigners built the case for Brexit around the idea that the British people had been betrayed by a combination of metropolitan liberal and European elites, and, as such, Brexit provided a chance for ordinary hard-working British people to regain control over their national destiny (Clarke and Newman, 2017).

A core part of this narrative centred on the supposed threat to public services posed by 'uncontrolled' immigration from the EU. This threat was said to be getting worse with the impending accession to the EU of Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey (which wasn't actually joining since accession negotiations had stalled). The Justice Secretary, Michael Gove, claimed that 'public services such as the NHS will face an unquantifiable strain as millions more become EU citizens and have the right to move to the UK' (May, 2016). Boris Johnson (2016b) warned that immigration was adding 'a population the size of Newcastle every year, with all the extra and unfunded pressure that puts on the NHS and other public services'.

This type of moral panic aligned itself with a long history of racialised fears over immigration which the Leave campaign was able to exploit. As Virdee and McGeever (2018: 1807) point out, 'a reservoir of latent racism could be activated through the production of appropriately coded language about immigration', sending out a signal 'that the Brexit project was precisely about keeping the nation Christian and white'. Thus, the nature of this threat hinged not just on the claim that immigrants were flooding in to drain the UK's scarce resources, but that the entire EU project was at odds with the fundamentally special character of the British people, their history and their unique global destiny. For the Leave campaign, such fears were used to stoke nostalgic 'fantasies of fulfilment' (Browning, 2019) as Brexit promised to restore the UK's unique political and cultural 'essence', hitherto stolen or betrayed by EU elites and migrant populations.

*The irrefutable 'will of the people'*

Such narratives of salvation ignited a level of political fervour with a quasi-religious quality. In the aftermath of the referendum the euphoria of victory quickly turned to a vehement preoccupation for many on the Leave side that Brexit was in the process of being stolen or betrayed by parliamentary and cultural elites. This betrayal narrative was used to fuel a heightened zeal for the idea that the sanctity of the narrow mandate that the referendum had provided for Brexit (with Leave winning by just 52–48 per cent) must be protected at all costs. To this end, many on the Leave side quickly seized on PM David Cameron's sentiment the morning after the referendum that 'the British people have voted to leave the European Union and their will must be respected'. From this point, the discursive myth of the 'will of the people' formed an irrefutable and unassailable commandment, signalling to both the British establishment and those who voted Remain that nothing could stand in the way of the popular mandate.

Despite the slim margin of the referendum victory, the 'will of the people' came to represent 'a singular homogeneous monolith' (Freedon, 2017: 7), transmuted into the unequivocal resolve of the British electorate as a whole. This served to sidestep the fact that the authority of the referendum mandate, and the type of instruction it conveyed to Parliament, had always been subject to intense contestation. Even before the referendum, many on the Remain side stressed that the *European Union Referendum Act* (2015) did not legally commit the government to implementing the result, while those on the Leave side argued that the government was committed politically (if not legally) to respecting the outcome. In the wake of the vote, such disputes became the subject of ever-more antagonistic debate. This was spurred by wider disagreements about the character of UK democracy and the extent to which the idea of popular sovereignty could be used to over-ride the historically grounded precedent of parliamentary sovereignty (Weale, 2017). Moreover, in the months after the referendum it became increasingly evident that the referendum vote had given no clear indication of what type of Brexit 'the people' had voted for.

Despite the plethora of divergent interpretations of the result, both prominent Leave figures and an increasingly strident tabloid press sought to elevate the myth of the 'will of the people' to the force of an 'irreversible truth' (Freedon, 2017), such that anyone seeking to contest its authority could be denounced as 'traitors' and charged with national betrayal. One of the most notable examples of this was an attack by the *Daily Mail*, which portrayed High Court judges as 'enemies of the people' for daring to insist that the process of formally leaving the EU required an explicit vote in Parliament. As such, 'the will of the people' as expressed in the referendum was portrayed as 'the only democratic institution' (Eleftheriadis, 2017), a supreme authority that could be unquestionably cited above all other political or legal institutions.

However, as negotiations between the UK and the EU revealed a variety of potential Brexit outcomes, it became politically expedient for different factions of the Leave camp to utilise the peoples' will myth to mobilise support for a particular form of Brexit. Amidst the resulting factionalism that erupted within Parliament, the various sides began to engage in a 'war of position' to impose their own interpretations of what it was, precisely, that the people had voted for (Kettell and Kerr, 2019). At this point, a number of prominent Leave MPs began to perpetuate the myth that the vote had delivered a mandate for an 'exclusively hard Brexit', or a clean break with the EU (Eleftheriadis, 2017). In the fevered

Parliamentary debates that followed, the tenor of some MPs' pitch for a hard Brexit was likened to that of a religious fervour. As the Conservative MP, Claire Perry, remarked: 'I feel sometimes I am sitting alongside colleagues who are like jihadis in their support for a hard Brexit. No Brexit is hard enough. Be gone, you evil Europeans. We never want you to darken our doors again' (HC Deb, 7 February 2017).

Such developments exposed a glaring contradiction at the heart of the Leave discourse. On the one hand, 'the people' was to be regarded as a monolithic and sacred force whose combined 'will' could be clearly interpreted and implemented in full. On the other hand, 'the people' were split into two antagonistic and irreconcilable camps – the 17.4 million 'true believers' in the Brexit faith versus those 'heretics' in the Remain camp whose ultimate ambition was to betray the cause. Yet Brexiteers rarely allowed themselves to be troubled by such discrepancies. This point has been noted throughout the literature on both Brexit and populism more generally (e.g. Suiter, 2016; Rose, 2017; Hopkin and Rosamond, 2018), with various authors citing the fact that populist movements often rely on a number of 'bullshit' claims (Frankfurt, 2005) which are strongly emotive in their appeal, yet largely indifferent to the truth. As we discuss in the final section, the strategic utilisation of such 'bullshit' discourse lay at the very heart of the Leave campaign, with the now famous 'Brexit bus' claim that the Holy Grail of British politics, the NHS, would receive an extra £350 million a week in funding in the event of a vote to Leave.

### **The Brexit bus campaign**

These ideas about the special status of the British people, the threat from EU elites and the sacred 'will' expressed in the referendum, were largely metaphysical in their appeal. Indeed, one of the oft-repeated criticisms from the Remain camp was that the benefits of Brexit were rarely rationalised in any concrete terms. One of the few exceptions to this was the strategic use of social policy issues to highlight the dividend that leaving the EU could bring.

The central feature of the Leave narrative was the slogan: 'Take back control'. The emphasis here was principally focussed around claims about the detrimental impact of immigration on public services, particularly the NHS. The centrepiece of this appeal was an infamous promotional campaign to create a direct link between the EU and social policy by emblazoning a bus with the slogan: 'We send the EU £350 million a week. Let's fund our NHS instead'. For emphasis, the letters 'NHS' were shown as the official NHS logo despite repeated warnings from the Department of Health for England not to use it on the grounds that it was 'against our guidelines' and risked 'misleading and confusing the public' (British Medical Journal, 2016).

The NHS Brexit bus proved to be one of the most controversial flashpoints of the referendum. The £350 million a week figure conflated the net and the gross components of the UK's contribution to the EU, providing only the gross figure (itself based on an estimate) and ignoring funds received from the EU in the form of a rebate and other financial payments. According to 2015 figures from the Office of National Statistics, the UK's net contribution to the EU was in the region of £199 million a week, a far cry from the figure presented (Morley, 2017). The claim also drew criticism from the head of the UK's Statistics Authority, Sir David Norgrove, who said it was 'a clear misuse of official statistics' (BBC News, 2017), and completely ignored the fact that the NHS was itself dependent on migrant workers. As the Health Foundation makes clear, 'migrants are an essential part of the health care workforce' (13.3 per cent of NHS staff in hospitals and



community services in England had a non-British nationality as of June 2019, with the figure for doctors rising to 28.4 per cent) and with persistent staffing shortages, '[t]he NHS needs more staff from overseas, not less' (Alderwick and Allen, 2019). Little wonder, then, that critics claimed the Leave campaign had set out to deliberately distort the truth. As Reid (2019: 624) observes, to many Remainers 'the NHS bus represents the apotheosis of a campaign divorced from facts'.

Assessing the relative impact of any single part of the Brexit narrative is clearly impossible. But the significance of focusing on the claimed benefits of Brexit on social policy, and especially the NHS, should not be underestimated. The Director of the Vote Leave campaign, Dominic Cummings (2017), later maintained that 'the £350 million/NHS argument was necessary to win', and that 'the connection between immigration, £350 million and the NHS ... was absolutely vital' for their success. As he put it, the linkages drawn by the slogan provided a hotwire for connecting the experiences of national decline to Britain's membership of the EU, stating that:

[F]or millions of people, £350m/NHS was about the economy and living standards – that's why it was so effective. It was clearly the most effective argument not only with the crucial swing fifth but with almost every demographic ... Would we have won without £350m/NHS? All our research and the close result strongly suggests No. (ibid.)

The effectiveness of the NHS Brexit bus can be attributed to a number of factors. One is its sheer simplicity, consisting of just thirteen words with a score of 102.6 on the standard Flesch-Kincaid reading ease test, indicating that it could be easily understood by the majority of six- and seven-year olds. In addition, the claim was strategically well-framed, presenting readers with a clear binary choice and channelling debate onto the costs of EU membership (Reid, 2019). The claim itself was also highly memorable. A study conducted in 2018 by the Policy Institute, with Ipsos MORI and UK in a Changing Europe, found that 42 per cent of respondents (and 65 per cent of Leave supporters) still believed that the UK sent the EU £350 million a week, long after the figures had been debunked.

The attempt to link Brexit to the NHS extended far beyond the bus campaign and was one of the central features of the wider Leave strategy. The claim was placed at the very top of a list of reasons for leaving the EU on the official Vote Leave website, which maintained that: 'We will be able to save £350 million a week. We can spend our money on our priorities like the NHS, schools and housing' (Why Vote Leave, 2016). The claim also featured prominently in other Vote Leave advertising. Nowhere was this more evident than on Facebook, where Vote Leave spent more than £2.7 million placing political advertisements (BBC News, 2018). Our analysis of these adverts (which were released to the Department for Media, Culture and Sport as part of an inquiry into the use of fake news) identifies ninety-two unique slogans in use during the referendum campaign.<sup>1</sup> Appeals to the NHS featured in 11.9 per cent of these adverts, and the £350 million figure featured in 17.4 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Examples of these adverts include: 'Let's give our NHS the £350 million the EU takes every week', 'Spend our money on our priorities. Like the NHS', 'The UK sends £350 million per week to the EU, enough to build a new NHS hospital', and 'Imagine if we gave £350m a week to our NHS instead of the EU!'

These messages, and the slogan used in the bus campaign, were designed to appeal to nativist, in/out-group sensibilities. This can be clearly seen in the sense of ownership and exclusion they convey. The wording of the bus campaign called on the British people to

spend a greater amount of their resources ('we' send the EU) not on 'the' NHS, but on 'our' NHS. Similarly, the Vote Leave website and Facebook adverts claimed that 'we' can save £350 million a week by leaving 'the' EU and spend 'our' money on 'our' priorities. This process of othering – thus preserving the sanctity of the unique British 'people' – was an integral part of the Vote Leave messaging strategy. The term 'we' featured in 25 per cent of all their Facebook advert slogans. The term 'our' featured in a total of 28.3 per cent. In this way the emphasis on the NHS helped to reinforce the key themes of the wider Leave campaign, helping to create and reinforce nationally constituted in/out group dynamics.

This widespread use of the NHS/ £350 million claim highlights a deeper reason for the success of the Brexit bus campaign, which is the 'mythical' status that the NHS holds in British national life. Famously described by the ex-Chancellor, Nigel Lawson, as 'the closest thing the English people have to a religion' (Spence, 2017), this is borne out consistently by polls and surveys showing the extent to which the NHS is revered by the British public. A survey by Opinium taken shortly before the referendum put the NHS top of its 'Pride of Britain' list, being the leading choice of 36 per cent of respondents, far ahead of 'British history' (in second place, with 25 per cent), 'British sense of humour' (with 23 per cent), the monarchy and the UK's landscape and architecture (with 22 per cent each) (Crouch, 2016). A survey carried out by Ipsos MORI for the Health Foundation in 2017 put the NHS first in a list of services that the public wanted to be protected from austerity cuts (with 88 per cent), far ahead of schools (56 per cent) and care for older people (40 per cent). Almost two thirds of respondents (64 per cent) felt that taxes should be raised to fund the NHS and 88 per cent felt that the NHS ought to be funded by general taxation and free at the point of use for all citizens (Health Foundation, 2017).

In this context, placing the NHS at the centre of the Brexit narrative was a shrewd political calculation – framing the NHS as the Holy Grail that could be rescued from the malign threat of the EU superstate and an influx of foreign migrants. In so doing, the campaign neatly cut into a variety of beliefs and emotions about Britain's place in the world and its membership of the EU. As Nerlich (2017) notes, claims about the NHS 'reinforced, exploited and entrenched various "myths" about the EU and about what it means to leave the EU'. And as Cromby (2019: 59-60) observes, the NHS Brexit bus campaign worked by promoting a sense of 'mythical thinking about Brexit' and 'by organising feelings of loyalty, affection, or gratitude toward the NHS, and conversely feelings of anxiety about its current state, in support of the "leave" position'.

## **Conclusion**

The discourse used to promote the idea of Brexit marshalled a range of quasi-religious and mythical tropes and themes, promising a form of national salvation for the British people. At the heart of the Leave campaign's promise to 'take back control', the NHS, and social policy more broadly, were utilised as the Holy Grail that could be rescued from the clutches of the malign forces that laid siege to Britain's unique historical place in the world. Thus, the religious aspects of Brexit centred on a nativist process of othering, in which secularised theological concepts such as 'sovereignty' and the 'nation' were utilised to place the blame for Britain's economic, political and social ills at the feet of the European Union. This was simultaneously aligned with claims about the exceptional character of the British people, leading to subsequent appeals around the need for them to regain their leading role in global affairs. Such quasi-religious narratives worked to

heighten the intense emotional fervour around Brexit and led many of its adherents to distance themselves from various facts or 'truths' about its potential future implications, effectively insulating claims about Brexit from any sort of rational critique. This emotional disconnect from expert advice, along with the willingness of true believers to accept various forms of 'bullshit', created the ideal conditions for the now famous NHS 'lie' on the side of the Brexit bus to play a pivotal role in securing victory for the Leave campaign.

Recent psychological research has found clear differences in reasoning between Leave and Remain supporters. Whilst the latter have been characterised by self-identification with facts, rationality and evidence, the former have been found to place far greater emphasis on appeals to emotion, nationalism and authoritarian values, all of which closely align to a religiously inspired view of the world (Zmigrod *et al.*, 2018; 2019). These findings are borne out by opinion polls and surveys. A poll of Conservative party members carried out in June 2019 found a strong preference for Brexit, even if it led to the breakup of the country, caused significant damage to the economy or promoted the destruction of the Conservative party itself (Smith, 2019). Thus, Brexit inspired in its believers a set of goals and desires that, to many on the Remain side, appeared wildly irrational and largely divorced from political and economic realities. Nevertheless, little of this was to trouble the loyal followers of the Brexit creed, whose faith in the project remained strong throughout the intensely difficult negotiations and domestic political wrangling over the UK's terms of exit. Indeed, not only did public support for Brexit remain remarkably solid throughout this period, levels of support for the hardest and potentially most damaging form of 'no deal' Brexit increased (Kettell and Kerr, 2019). It became increasingly evident that followers of Brexit were prepared to make sacrifices – potentially to Britain's future prosperity and unity between its nations – for the goal of retrieving its national character, most powerfully symbolised by the revered NHS.

## Notes

- 1 These adverts can be found at: [https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Fake\\_news\\_evidence/Vote-Leave-50-Million-Ads.pdf](https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/culture-media-and-sport/Fake_news_evidence/Vote-Leave-50-Million-Ads.pdf), URL accessed 4 March 2020.
- 2 Data on how frequently each advertisement was shown are not available.

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