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## **Christianity as the Background Music of Europe's Far-Right: Fascism, Identitarianism, Antisemitism, and Islamophobia**

*By Paul Hedges and Luca Farrow*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The language of cultural Christianity can denote exclusivism and prejudice such as antisemitism and Islamophobia, but it is important to discern between innocent and sinister claims to Christianity that can use seemingly similar language. In many places, exclusivist language and attitudes tied to Christian identity claims are on the rise.*

### **COMMENTARY**

When she was campaigning, Giorgia Meloni, Italy's new Prime Minister and leader of the Brothers of Italy party, proudly portrayed herself as a [Christian Mother](#). While appealing to religion, her rhetoric did not characterise her quest for political power as an overtly Christian endeavour. In that sense it may be distinguished from much of the language of the Christian right in the US that helped to propel such figures as Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump to the White House.

Indeed, in Europe, while appeals to Christianity, or a common "[Judeo-Christian](#)" heritage, are found in political discourse, they currently seem to form part of a background cultural worldview rather than featuring prominently in policy debates. In Meloni's case, her rhetoric seems designed to place her within a traditionalist Italian cultural matrix where family values are central. However, we can suggest that discourse around Christianity is also a major part of the dog whistle discourse of political groups and lone actors, including [those on the far right](#), that disguises exclusivist, sometimes, extremist, stances towards other groups. As such, we need to be careful in identifying the role that claims to Christianity play, from the benign to the suspect.

It is important to distinguish what such claims signify. This is because Christian identity claims linked to extreme right-wing identities and behaviours are entering mainstream

discourses in various locations but may be framed as innocent claims of simple Christian identity. As such, policy, media, and theological responses must be aware of what is at stake.

### **Islamophobia and the Ideology of “Judeo-Christian”**

When [Anders Breivik](#) went on his killing spree in Norway on 22 July 2011, his manifesto set out his belief that a Europe with a White and culturally Christian region was under threat. Such claims are often placed in terms of a Judeo-Christian heritage put at great risk by liberal multiculturalists whose policies would lead to a Muslim takeover. Despite having an ambivalent relationship with Christianity himself, Breivik placed Christianity at the centre stage of his violence, for instance in portraying himself as a latter-day Knight Templar. According to this ideology, Christian values and heritage, or Judeo-Christian ones, are placed in contradistinction to Islam.

“Judeo-Christian”, the term [employed by far right](#) European politicians such as Geert Wilders and [Nigel Farage](#), is insidious on two counts. While it seems to describe an inclusive biblically inspired set of values, shared by Jews and Christians, it may be used in an implicitly Islamophobic manner to suggest that Islam is incompatible with European culture. Separately, it continues old antisemitic tropes in which Jewish values and ways of understanding the Bible and Jews’ place in the world are viewed as superseded by Christianity, for most of Europe is a Christian dominated space, not one shared equally by Jews who have [often been excluded and persecuted](#).

### **Fascism, Antisemitism and Religion**

Fascism is often lazily and indiscriminately used to describe a wide range of right-wing groups. In the case of Meloni’s Brothers of Italy party, its [roots](#) can be traced back to the Mussolini-supporting neo-fascist Italian Social Movement. Despite her denials, arguably elements in her party still [retain fascist tendencies](#).

Antisemitism has long been a part of the fascist movement and while many on Europe’s far right, for instance the Brothers of Italy and the French National Rally under Marine Le Pen, have tried to distance themselves from antisemitism, it often lurks in the heritage and on the fringes. Fascist (Nazi) symbology was also seen at alt-right [rallies](#) in the US, and at the very least, echoes of fascism can be identified among figures as diverse as Hungary’s Viktor Orban, [Trump](#), Meloni, and others. Notably, a utilisation of Christian language, symbols, or an appeal to Christian leaders mark them all.

Historically, fascism’s relationship to Christianity has been complicated. Mussolini reached a reciprocal [accord](#) with the Catholic Church recognizing the independence of the government of Italy and of the Vatican State. Germany’s [Lutherans often willingly backed Hitler](#), and while the Catholics were more reluctantly brought on board, Pope Pious XII did [not condemn](#) Nazism. Yet the socially and morally conscious voices of many churches spoke out against the prejudice and totalitarian impulses of fascism. Fascist leaders themselves often demonstrated a pragmatic acceptance of the [need](#) to speak to the religious constituencies they appeal to. As such, fascism and religion may often go together.

## Family Values and Identitarianism

Christian language is also used by the far right in Europe to [protest](#) alternative forms of social and family arrangements, especially those related to alternative sexualities. While having right-wing political views and appealing to Christianity does not make somebody anti-LGBTQI+ – for instance, the former UK Conservative Party Prime Minister David Cameron championed the legalization of same-sex marriage during his premiership – exclusionary anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric with an appeal to Christianity is a common feature on the European right. This seems to be the case in Italy, and opposition to non-heterosexual rights has been part of traditionalist sentiments in Christian associated right-wing parties from Poland to Hungary.

We can see this as connected to the growth of identitarianism, or an ideological position based upon an identity taken as fixed, monolithic, traditional, and founded in religion. This can be seen in various populist movements, where leaders supposedly speaking for the “silent majority”, “the masses”, or [similar supposed sets of people](#) set themselves against those portrayed as the “elites”, “liberals”, “metropolitans”, or “cosmopolitans”.

Whether such a clash of worldviews and values really exists is debatable, but harking on such generic themes as family values, tradition, and Christianity can bring together a diverse range of voters who may perceive one or more of these as under threat. This can then help create a common bond, and with it potentially a shared agenda on values which may not have been central for many before.

## Christianism and Cultural Christianity

Sociologist Rogers Brubaker spoke of [Christianism](#) as a political identitarianism that treats Christianity as a marker of civilization, often posited in terms of racial purity and as facing external threats. On the other hand, political scientist Matthew Feldman treats [Christianism](#) as naming a cultural and political form, even “perversion”, of Christianity. He sees it manifested historically in such places as Romania and Croatia in World War Two, alongside Spain’s fascist regime. Feldman also argues that it is resurgent today.

Such arguments resonate with the case made here, that appeals to Christianity as a cultural background can often signify an allegiance to a wider range of agendas, which may include, inter alia, Islamophobia, antisemitism (often cloaked today), anti-alternative sexuality, support of fascist ideological forms, and with this, hostility to migrants and a yearning for anti-democratic forms of governance or strong man rule.

## Discernment

Yet, Christian values may counter all of these far-right agendas, as well as support them, and invoking Christianity may also speak to personal convictions of piety, or a milder sense of tradition and comfortable images of home and country not tied to Christianity. In this context, some scholars have spoken of a contestation over “[the claim to Christianity](#)”, often noting differences between political leaders utilizing the rhetoric of what we term here Christianity and church leaders.

Before we speak too readily of Christian far-right extremism in such cases, we must be aware of the claims and discourse that can underlie seemingly similar language which can range from the innocent to the sinister.

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