

# Nationalist and/or Populist Political Movements – How do Evangelicals Vote and Respond?

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## 1. Introduction – the context, swing to the right

The focus of this chapter is the growing attraction of nationalist and populist political movements among the Christian electorate, including evangelical Protestants. Various evangelical leaders are concerned and critical towards this trend, which raises the question whether or not a nationalist political stance is compatible with evangelical identity. We will look at the trend of nationalism, different understandings of what is a nation, and where nationalism comes in in the changing political landscape all over Europe. We shall also bring to light the differences and overlap with populism. Then we will analyse the position of evangelical Protestant and analyse why so many vote for parties with a nationalist outlook. Finally we will outline an evangelical response, based on biblical considerations.

## 2. The trend and the European Parliament

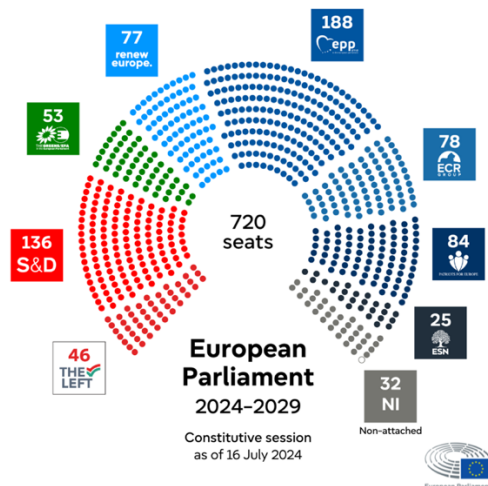
The elections for the European Parliament on 9 June 2024, as well as recent parliamentary elections in the Netherlands, France, Great-Britain and other countries, have illustrated a change in the political landscape that is taking place across the continent. Besides the traditional parties, divided into right-wing, centre and left-wing, new political formations have emerged which are transforming the political landscape. Most notable is the growing appeal of nationalist parties and movements, many of which have a populist outlook. The combined result of the latter in elections varies from 10 to 35 per cent nationally, and even more in some regions.<sup>1</sup>

In the media these parties are often collectively designated as “extreme-right”, “radical-right”, “populist” or “nationalist”, but in actual fact they vary from country to country. As for their political agendas, there is considerable overlap with traditional or so-called moderate right-wing parties on the one hand, and social-democratic parties on the other hand. Yet what they have in common is a concern for the sovereignty and the economic interests of their own nation, and for the cultural identity of its native population, over and against economic immigration, multiculturalism, and the open borders and free-trade liberalism of “Brussels” and “Europe”.

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<sup>1</sup> A case in point is Great Britain. During the general elections on 4 July 2024, the Reform UK Party led by the Brexit campaigner Nigel Farage obtained almost 15% of the votes. Due to the “first past the post” system, the party only obtained four out of the 650 seats in the House of Commons. In comparison, the social democratic Labour Party obtained 411 out of the 650 seats (i.e., 63%) but they won only 33.7% of the votes, against 23.7% for the Conservatives.

In the European Parliament, these parties are allied in three groups: the largest one is “Patriots for Europe” with 84 seats,<sup>2</sup> followed by the “European Conservatives and Reformists” (ECR) with 78 seats<sup>3</sup> and “Europe of Sovereign Nations” (ESN) with 25 seats.<sup>4</sup> Together they comprise 23.2 % of the parliament (187 out of 720 seats). These numbers do not include the representatives of similar parties who are among the 32 non-attached MEPs or have joined the European People’s Party.<sup>5</sup>



### 3. Nationalism

#### 3.1 Definition(s)

All these parties are invariably called nationalist and/or populist. But what exactly does that mean? We can define nationalism in a general sense as a strong sense of belonging to a certain people in a certain country; an attachment to its history and its national institutions; and also to what is considered the collective identity of this people and this country. This sense of belonging primarily concerns the nation in the sense of a people, an ethnic group, which is not the same as the modern nation-state.

Social scientists do not agree on a clear definition of nationalism. Secular commentators have put forward a variety of distinctions between nationalism and patriotism, or types of nationalism, to distinguish between what is acceptable and what is not. There is also much disagreement about the historical roots of nationalism. Some see it as dating from the French Revolution or the development of German Romanticism, while others trace it back

<sup>2</sup> The formation of the parliamentary group *Patriots for Europe* was initiated by the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orban (Fidesz). Its members are MEPs from France, Hungary (two parties), Italy, Spain, Portugal, Czech Republic (two parties), Austria, Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Greece and Latvia. The president is Jordan Bardella of the French *Rassemblement national*.

<sup>3</sup> The group *European Conservatives and Reformists* (ECR) includes MEPs from Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Greece, Italy, Latvia (two parties), Lithuania (three parties), Luxemburg, Netherlands, Poland (two parties), Romania (two parties) and some independent MEPs from France and Estonia.

<sup>4</sup> The group *Europe of Sovereign Nations* includes MEPs from Bulgaria, Czechia, France, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia.

<sup>5</sup> The European People’s Party is the largest group in the European Parliament. It includes mainly Christian Democrats, but also moderate right-wing MEPs such as *Les Republicains* of France.

to the Reformation or even to the medieval period. Perhaps the most insightful definition is that of Scottish social scientist Anthony Smith, who writes:

The core doctrine of nationalism is a very abstract one. It says that the world is divided into nations, and that each has its character, its destiny, its history. It says that people belong, or should belong to a nation, that nations should be free and express themselves fully, and that a world of peace and justice is the one that's founded on free nations.

What has happened is that in each case, this doctrine has been married to other ideas of particular nations, particular ethnic communities, particular political communities, which change the tenor and the tone of that core doctrine. For example, in Poland they had an idea that Poland was a crucified Christ, which had to be resurrected. Nowhere is this part of the doctrine of nationalism. Some nationalisms may be liberal or bourgeois, in Czechia for example. Other nationalisms may be anti-imperialist, anticolonial, or perhaps working class or peasant nationalisms, depending on the situation of that particular group ...<sup>6</sup>

This definition is helpful because it highlights that nationalism is plural in nature and may be fused with diverse and even competing political objectives.

### 3.2 Different understandings of nation

At the heart of the issue are different understandings of what is a nation and what nationality means. In a recent interview, the Dutch political scientist Eric Hendriks explained:

Conservatives, particularly here in Hungary, have a different, more romantic understanding of the nation than left-liberal circles in the Netherlands, in which Dutchness is often reduced to a matter of bureaucratic-legal registration. In the left-liberal ideal, the nation is an open field of individuals within a "neutral" legal framework. (Here in Hungary) in contrast, there is the romantic notion of nationhood – which grounds the nation within a cultural or ethnohistorical destiny. This understanding developed in the Romantic period and used to be common throughout Europe. Hungarian conservatives see their nation as consisting of substantial historical units: from the Magyar to several other ethnicities, cultures and religious groups.<sup>7</sup>

Hendriks goes on to explain why leftwing liberals want to strip the concept of nationhood of its deep grounding in a historical people and a shared culture, and instead reduce it to a legal and official category. Their argument is that if you hold a Dutch passport, you are Dutch. This allows new Dutch people to immediately become fully Dutch – to belong completely on an abstract level. The advantage of this liberal view is that it is maximally open and inclusive. It leaves as much room as possible for religious and (sub)cultural pluralism in society. In this framework, what holds the nation-state together should be no more than what is legally and morally necessary to keep the playing field open and tolerant.

But then Hendriks asks: is Dutch citizenship really just a legal-bureaucratic category, a passport, a formal framework on the leftwing liberal model? Or is it a civic-republican

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Anthony Smith in the newspaper *The Ukrainian Week* about his book *The Cultural Foundation of Nations*.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Hendriks, "Naties in Europa. Boedapest: kruispunt voor liberalen, conservatieven en postliberalen", *Groen*, Journal of the *Wetenschappelijk instituut* of the Dutch political party *Christen Unie*, Issue December 2023, p. 15. My translation from Dutch.

practice with duties and a shared ethos, an existential unity, a community of destiny that extends through the ages, as conservatives hold?

Hendriks concludes by saying that “each of the two models and the various intermediate forms – more or less culturalist, more or less demanding, more substantial or more legal, more romantic or more liberal – all have issues. And none is equally applicable in every country”.<sup>8</sup>

### **3.3 Civic and ethnic nationalism (Ignatieff)**

The distinction between a cultural-Romantic and the leftwing liberal vision of what a nation is, runs parallel to the distinction between civic and ethnic nationalism proposed by several authors like Michael Ignatieff. Civic nationalism, which Ignatieff and others find acceptable, holds that a nation should be composed of all those who subscribe to its political creed, irrespective of race, ethnicity, colour or religion. According to this view, what holds a nation together are not its common roots but the rule of law.

Ethnic nationalism, according to Ignatieff, finds that national belonging is the overriding form of belonging, based on the people’s pre-existing ethnic characteristics, their language, religion, customs and tradition. In the nineteenth century, the peoples of Europe that lived under imperial regimes were inspired by this nationalism, which is currently gaining ground in many European countries. Ignatieff warns that the stronger the sense of belonging to one’s own group, the more hostile, the more violent, the feelings towards outsiders, the “other”.<sup>9</sup>

However, this neat distinction does not always accord with reality. Anthony Smith brings out the fact that even nations based on common citizenship do remember the ethnic tradition that has shaped them in the past.<sup>10</sup>

### **3.4 Nationalism and liberation – two sides of the coin**

In the past, a large part of Europe consisted of multi-ethnic and multicultural kingdoms and empires: Holy Roman, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Russian. However, during the last centuries the trend has been that each nation (people) wanted to be independent in its own nation-state. Some states now correspond to a single nation or ethnic people, whilst others include significant ethnic minorities which may strive for autonomy or even independence. This trend explains why there is so much apprehension towards the idea of a federal European Union. Nations (peoples) have fought so hard to gain their sovereignty that they are very reluctant, to say the least, to accept a new supranational layer of governance “above” them.

Nationalism was a major drive to liberate states and unite people in a common cause in the 1989 revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe. These were not just rebellions against an illegitimate regime but also nationalist revolutions against Soviet domination. Today, the same nationalism is a potent force to rally the people of Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic States to defend their country against Russian imperialism. On the other hand, the same drive was also responsible for multiple claims to sovereignty which caused conflict and war in the ethno-federal setting of former Yugoslavia from 1992 onwards.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Idem*, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging*, 1-6, 189.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, interview.

<sup>11</sup> This is brought out by Valerie Bunce, “The national Idea: Imperial Legacies and Post-Communist Pathways”, *Eastern Europe East European Politics and Societies* 19.3 (2005) 412.

Ethnic nationalism is open to idolatry because it requires loyalty to the state, the people and the race, the motherland, the fatherland, King and country. Even in states where the initial struggle was viewed positively, nations that affirm their identity can be tempted by self-absorption, narrowness of spirit and xenophobia. In multicultural states the situation is complicated by the fact that ethnicity may be fluid and many people now have more than one ethnic identity.<sup>12</sup>

#### **4. Populism and how it relates to nationalism**

A political concept closely related to nationalism is populism, a term derived from the Latin word *populus*, “people”. The Oxford English dictionary gives a neutral definition: populism is “support for the concerns of ordinary people”. In our time this term refers to political leaders and movements who claim to express “the will of the people” and who aim to defend it against opposing forces.

The difficulty of the label is that most leaders do not self-identify as populist; it is a negative label given to them by academics and media. It is used pejoratively, much like the labels nationalism, far-right and extreme right. The movements to which these labels refer rather identify as patriotic, sovereigntist, anti-austerity, illiberal or post-liberal, democrats or freedom party.

##### **4.1 Two oppositions**

Populism can be characterised by two oppositions. Firstly a “vertical” opposition of “the people” against elites who do not defend their interests. They might be EU technocrats, the current government, financial institutions, multinational companies, or all of these together. And secondly, a “horizontal” opposition of the native people against incomers who threaten their economic position and the society to which they are attached; immigrants and the growing immigrant communities, especially the Muslims among them.

##### **4.2 Populist movements – left and right**

As a result of these oppositions, populist leaders and their voters they tend to be in favour of direct democracy (in the form of a referendum); they also tend to be intolerant towards the ruling elites and political parties on the other end of the spectrum, arguing that they do not represent “the people”; and they favour a strong state, even an authoritarian form of governance. The British theologian and social theorist John Milbank explains:

More precisely, a populist movement pursues causes that tend to centre on a way of life that is perceived as threatened. Not so much equality is demanded as the right to go on quietly flourishing in a particular way to which people are attached. Sometimes, this means that it is the values and lifestyles of the modestly successful, the upper working-classes and the lower middle-classes that are being defended against both more freewheeling wealthy elites and the more anarchic, gregarious forces of working-class life. (...) As to structures, populism characteristically cares little about formal democracy or the rights of minorities. Typically, it looks to a strong leader to deliver it from forces seen as perverse, though they may sometimes be inevitable. These can be the incursion

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<sup>12</sup> For this section I am indebted to Rosemary Caldwell, “Populism, patriotism and hospitality”, in: Jeff Fountain (ed.), *Hope, Healing and Hospitality. The 2017 State of Europe Report* (Amsterdam: Seismos Press/Schuman Centre for European Studies, 2018), p. 10-15.

of foreigners or drastic changes in the general way of life of a people. It tends to Caesarism.<sup>13</sup>

Populist politicians are Eurosceptic and against the way in which the EU currently functions and opposed to economic globalisation of which the EU is seen as an agent.

Although populism is usually a right-wing movement, there are also left-wing forms of populism such as *Sumar* (formerly *Podemos*) in Spain, *Socialistische Partij* in the Netherlands, and *La France Insoumise* in France.

### **4.3 Populism and democracy**

Supporters argue that populism constitutes the essence of democratic politics, and that it is liberalism, and the liberal elite, that is the problem.

According to opponents, populism's main danger is that it is a moralist ideology that rejects any division of interests or opinions within "the people". It rejects the legitimacy of opponents and weakens the rights of minorities. This uncompromising stand leads to a polarised political culture, dividing the people into "us" who are good and "them" who are a bad. Some call it "an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism".<sup>14</sup>

### **4.4 Populism and nationalism: different and overlapping**

Rosemary Caldwell helpfully describes the relation between populism and nationalism as follows:

There is a close connection between European populist parties and nationalism, often combined with authoritarianism. Their xenophobic nature comes from a concept of the nation that relies on an ethnic and chauvinistic definition of the people and rejects the multicultural nature of many modern European societies.<sup>15</sup>

In left-wing and progressive circles, as well as in the media, nationalism and populism are often portrayed as identical and collectively labelled as "ultra" or "extreme" right-wing. But that is an oversimplification. Not all right-wing parties which emphasise national identity and economic sovereignty are therefore populist. A "my nation-first" kind of political agenda is not necessarily populist in the sense of anti-elite, against representative democracy, and in favour of an autocratic regime. Being patriotic does not automatically mean that one is against immigration and against allowing non-native communities to express themselves in society. Similarly, not all patriotic political leaders oppose European integration and even the European Union, as long as national sovereignty is maintained.

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<sup>13</sup> John Milbank, "The Problem of Populism and the Promise of a Christian Politics", published on the website of the Australian network ABC News, 16 Feb 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-problem-of-populism-and-the-promise-of-a-christian-politics/10096050>. For a fuller treatment of the same subject, see his chapter, "Virtue against sovereignty," in James Arthur (ed.), *Virtues in the Public Sphere: Citizenship, Civic Friendship and Duty* (London: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> See the discussion in Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Populism," in: Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargent and Marc Stears, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 500-506.

<sup>15</sup> Caldwell, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

Similarly, populist movements are not by definition nationalistic. Left-wing populism has a mainly economic agenda. It opposes austerity measures and the borderless free market of neo-liberalism. It also expresses a sort of economic nationalism versus the supranational policies imposed by the EU and the European Central Bank. German journalist Matthias Krupa speaks of an emerging “left-wing nationalism” which “condemns the EU as the cold-hearted perpetrator of endless neoliberalism”.<sup>16</sup> But these parties are not at all attached to national identity nor to the traditional culture of the nation.

However, right-wing populist movements are invariably nationalistic. When they talk about the “people”, they mean the native population. Playing on feelings of “us against them”, calling for protection of the national economy, and depicting the ruling elite as well as the immigrant newcomers as threats to the economic and cultural security of “the people”, they foster an exclusive, if not a militant nationalism.

### **5. Nationalism in the political landscape: GAL versus TAN**

So far, I have approached the issue of nationalism in a rather theoretical way. In practice, the issue is complicated because a nationalist political agenda never stands alone; it is always combined with certain positions in other issues. Therefore, we should take a look at the political landscape at large, to see where nationalism comes in and also where an anti-nationalist stance comes in. In fact, the upsurge of nationalism and the reactions it provokes illustrate well how the political landscape across Europe is changing profoundly.

Political scientists are now complementing the traditional left-right model with a new one, called GAL–TAN. The capital letters stand for Green–Alternative–Libertarian and Traditional–Authoritarian–Nationalist respectively. The traditional model of right-left is based on social-economic views. The new model is helpful for two reasons. First, moderate right-wing and moderate left-wing movements have become comparable with respect to the social and economic issues that divided them in the past; it is now better to qualify them together as centrist. Second, new issues now dominate the political discussion and the intentions of voters, such as the environment, European integration, immigration, bureaucracy, legislation on medical ethics, gender, discrimination and multiculturalism.

The political scientists have noted that certain issues tend to go together. On the one hand there is a cluster of “Green” environmental challenges, Alternatives to the consumerist economy and Liberal (if not libertarian) cultural values and ways of life; hence the acronym GAL. On the other hand, there is a cluster of attachment to Traditional values, an emphasis on the Authority of the state and its institutions, in particular the police, often linked with a call for strong political leadership, and a national orientation (hence the acronym TAN).

As people have rallied around the new issues, new political movements, parties and groupings have emerged. Some existing mainstream parties have morphed and now position themselves as more GAL or more TAN.<sup>17</sup> The principal issues that divide these two types of movements are the immigration of non-Europeans and European integration.

#### **5.1 Threefold security vs universalism**

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<sup>16</sup> Matthias Krupa, “Nationalism on the Left,” *Die Zeit Online*, September 2015, at <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2015-09/left-wing-nationalism-europe>.

<sup>17</sup> More about the GAL–TAN scale in Tarik Abou-Chadi, “Niche party success and mainstream party policy shifts, how green and radical right parties differ in their impact”, *British Journal of Political Science* 46.2 (2016): 417–436.

TAN-parties are Eurosceptic and strongly opposed to (economic) immigration. We can summarise the priorities of “TAN-parties” as three securities: first *economic* security (jobs, purchasing power), second *physical* security (authority, police) and third *cultural* security (maintaining “our” norms, values and way of life in a multi-ethnic society).

While nationalism is usually linked to parties with a TAN agenda, it can also be present in left-wing populist parties, especially those who are critical of the economic agenda of the EU. However, nationalism is largely absent from most “progressive” and “liberal” movements with a GAL agenda. By and large, the latter favour universalism as an alternative to nationalism. Universalism here means the universal value of human rights, the belief that all cultures are equally valid in a multicultural society, and preference for Europeanism, a federal Europe, which is in fact universalism on the scale of our continent.

In summary, both nationalism and the alternatives to nationalism are part of a wider package of political priorities. This makes it complicated for anyone to take position on this single issue.

## **6. The position of Christians**

### **6.1 Christians politically disinherited**

In the present, changing political landscape, Christians are forced to reorient themselves. Shall they remain faithful to the political stream for which they have always voted or will they join an emerging political formation, to influence it from within? We see that the GAL–TAN divide cuts right through the political orientation of Christians, including evangelical Protestants. Some prioritise “creation care” and related environmental issues, so they are attracted to GAL parties; but they run into conflict with the cultural liberalism that is very present in green movements. Other Christians are concerned about upholding traditional Christian values in legislation and defending the Christian heritage, so they are attracted to TAN parties; but they are uncomfortable with the overt anti-foreigner attitude of these movements.

One way to cope with these discrepancies is to create Christian movements within these parties in order to influence their internal discussions, but it remains to be seen whether this is an effective way to wield influence and whether this will be accepted at all.

Since the end of the nineteenth century, Christians in many countries formed “Christian” political parties or movements in order to develop a distinctive political vision, based on the social teaching of Catholic and Protestant churches. This enabled them to play a role in the pluralist liberal democracy and to affirm the values and issues that are important to them. However, as a result of the secularisation the traditional Christian-democratic parties are in decline. Moreover, they have adapted their approach to the changing political landscape by adopting either a GAL or a TAN kind of agenda. This situation makes the value of having a Christian party questionable and leaves Christians politically disinherited.

### **6.2 Evangelicals and nationalist parties today: two views**

Election surveys in several countries indicate that many practicing Christians are attracted by TAN parties.<sup>18</sup> Is this compatible with the principles of the Christian faith? With respect

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<sup>18</sup> A few examples: the report on a survey among conservative Christians in the Netherlands by Eduard Sloot, “De PVV is ook onder christenen de grootste partij, maar het verschilt sterk per kerkverband” (*Nederlands Dagblad*, 21 December 2023); a similar report on the political stance of conservative Catholics in France, which is comparable to that of many French Evangelicals, by Paul

to this question, there is debate going on in the Church at large, evolving around two different views. The first view is expressed by the official discourse of many Church leaders, of mission agencies and Christian humanitarian organisations – at any rate in Western Europe. They generally denounce nationalism and populist parties, and they recall universal moral values such as human dignity and social justice. They call for hospitality to immigrants and emphasise the value of European collaboration and integration..

On the other hand, many church members do not follow these directives. Almost invisibly, they vote for populist or far-right politicians who take a strong stance against immigration and defend traditional cultural values. Initially these politicians mainly gained support among nominal Christians, for whom Christianity is more a matter of cultural identity than of personal faith, but they are now also attracting practising Christians.

The *Rassemblement national* (RN) in France is a case in point. Sociologist Pascal Perrineau has shown that the RN has deeply penetrated the nominally Catholic population for whom “Christianity” is the same as the traditional culture, but that practising Catholics long resisted voting for the RN.<sup>19</sup> However, the latest indications are that more and more practising Christians in France support the RN or another TAN-type movement. We can assume that other countries show similar trends, as far as Catholics are concerned.

### **6.3 Motivations**

There is now some research as to why both nominal and practising Christians vote for parties with a TAN-type agenda. We do not know of any research among evangelical Protestants, but we have sufficient indications to suggest that their attitudes and voting are fairly similar to those of other Christians. We can observe four main motivations.

#### **6.3.1 Agreement with the political priorities of TAN parties**

The main motivation is that they agree with the priorities of these parties mentioned above: Euroscepticism, anti-immigration and concern for threefold security: economic, physical and cultural.

#### **6.3.2 Solidarity with Israel, stand against antisemitism**

Evangelical Christians have a tradition of solidarity with the Jewish people, support for the State of Israel and taking position against antisemitism. These points are still important for many evangelicals in deciding for which party they shall vote. It is remarkable that these issues have “switched sides”, so to say: the traditional antisemitism of right-wing nationalists has largely disappeared. Contemporary TAN-kind parties are generally pro-Israel and opposed to antisemitism. On the other hand, many GAL-type parties have abandoned the traditional left-wing support for the Jewish people and the State of Israel. Instead, they see the Muslims in their country as well as the Palestinians in and around Israel as the “victims”, and the State of Israel as a colonising power. In some of these parties, this leads

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Airiau, “Des catholiques trouvent dans l’extrême droite actuelle l’expression d’une contestation” (*La Croix*, 20 June 2024); and the conclusion of the German author Hannsjörg Hemminger, that “many Evangelicals lean towards the AfD - but more often they are apolitical” (“Die Union ist keine Heimat mehr”, *Zeitzeichen, Evangelische Kommentare zu Religion und Gesellschaft*, 2018, [https://zeitzeichen.net/archiv/2018\\_April\\_evangelikale-und-die-afd](https://zeitzeichen.net/archiv/2018_April_evangelikale-und-die-afd))

<sup>19</sup> Pascal Perrineau, *La France au Front : essai sur l’avenir du Front national* (Paris : Fayard, 2014).

to a vehement antizionism, which often amounts to outright antisemitism. This switch affects evangelical Protestant voters, in favour of a TAN party.

### **6.3.3 Opposition to cultural liberalism**

Christians voting for TAN parties are attracted by their positive stance on Christian cultural heritage. Many Christians are concerned about the decline of Christianity as a religion and the demise of the “Christian” character of the society in which they grew up. This explains why they are attracted by political leaders who seem to be defending traditional values based on traditional Christian moral teaching. The French historian and religious scientist Paul Airiau detects that increasing numbers of traditional or conservative Catholics, including the Catholic movement of charismatic renewal, are attracted by nationalist right-wing parties such as the *Rassemblement national* led by Marine Le Pen and *Reconquête* led by Eric Zemmour. What he observes among Catholics can also be seen among evangelicals, many of whom share the same conservative political outlook and the same traditional views on family, life and other ethical issues. Therefore, in the following quotes, I have changed “Catholic” into “Christian”.

The entire Christian electorate is undergoing a process of moving to the right. This is a way to protest against the legislative changes in the area of morality.

Moreover, there is a strong sense of identity. These Christians speak about our country being culturally Christian, and that it would lose its identity if it were completely torn away from Christianity. This vision insists on a national, almost ethnic dimension, which until now was counterbalanced by the Christian values of fraternity, reasonableness and charity towards all the needy, including refugees.

Moreover, gender issues play an important role in the thinking of these Christians... They contest the so-called cultural liberalism that is promoted by progressive and left-wing parties. The progressive idea of the left is that the human being and sexual identity are not given by nature, but social and cultural constructs. Against the traditional family, made up of a father, a mother and children, they promote the absolute freedom of the individual, outside any framework considered to be natural. So, individuals have the absolute freedom to do what they want with themselves, particularly in the name of human rights.

The Christian current to the right, on the other hand, affirms the existence of a stable human nature comprising two sexes articulated to each other.<sup>20</sup>

### **6.3.4 Concern about Christian heritage and growing public influence of Islam**

Finally, we see concern about the preservation of the cultural and moral heritage of Christianity and opposition to the growing influence of Islam and Muslim religious practice in the public sphere. Paul Airiau observes:

There has also been a shift towards a discourse on the need for immigrants to integrate in terms of assimilation to “our” culture, and the exclusion of those who do not want to integrate. There is also the fear of Islam flooding in.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Airiau, “Des catholiques trouvent dans l’extrême droite actuelle l’expression d’une contestation” (*La Croix*, 20 June 2024); our translation from French

<sup>21</sup> *Idem*.

#### **6.4 Instrumentalising the “Christian” cultural identity – West versus Central and East**

It should be noted, however, that many leaders of nationalist or TAN parties are non-religious or only nominal Church members – at least in Western Europe. Nor do all of them take the same position as evangelicals and other conservative Christians on ethical issues; in fact, they often find themselves at odds with conservative church leaders on these issues.

Nationalist leaders and their movements are generally opposed to signs of Islam in the public sphere such as minarets and calls for prayer, prayer in the workplace, serving halal meat in public schools, wearing dress that shows religious affiliation such as burkas or veils, and so on. The emphasis on the “Christian” cultural identity of the native population is combined with opposition to the culture and religion of people with a non-European background. The French sociologist Olivier Roy points out that the leadership of the *Rassemblement national* often finds itself at odds with the Catholic Church.<sup>22</sup> The RN is an amalgam of secularist, Christian and neo-pagan currents, which tends to see the Church as too liberal on issues of immigration, and yet, interestingly, too conservative on family values and sexuality. The RN can therefore dismiss the Church as an element of the French establishment. Roy finds that the leaders of the RN and of similar movements in other countries are “instrumentalising Christianity for political ends”. For them, religion matters first and foremost as a marker of identity, enabling them to distinguish between the good “us” and the bad “them”. They defend the cultural heritage and would subsidise the restoration of cathedrals, *non pas pour les prières mais pour les pierres*, not because of their prayers but because of their stones, their architectural value. Christianity as national and cultural identity is so “thin” that, as Roy puts it, that it can be easily “hijacked”. He goes on to say:

The claim to defend the Christian identity of a nation has the dual purposes of building nostalgia for a golden national past and depicting Islam as a religion that is intrinsically foreign to “our” European culture. Nationalist and/or populist movements that employ Christianity to this end are “Christian” largely to the extent that they reject Islam.<sup>23</sup>

The same cannot be said of leaders of political parties with a nationalist outlook in Central and Eastern Europe (Poland, Slovakia, Croatia and Hungary), where they are in government. Many of them are practising Christians and personally committed to traditional values rooted in the Christian history of their country. They are opposed to the liberal or libertarian ethical values which in the West are called “European values”. In this respect, the Hungarian prime minister Victor Orban speaks of illiberalism, by which he means the rejection, not of liberal economy or liberal democracy as such, but of these liberal values. For the same reason, the constitutions of several countries in Central and European Europe state that marriage is the union of a man and a woman.

#### **6.5 Should Christian voters be blamed for the same?**

Although politicians are thus instrumentalising the Christian heritage for political ends, should Christians who vote for them be blamed for the same? I do not think so. Many

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<sup>22</sup> Olivier Roy, “The French National Front: From Christian Identity to Laïcité”, in Nadia Marzouki and others, eds., *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion* (London: Hurst, 2016), 79–93.

<sup>23</sup> *Idem*, p. 86.

Christians who vote for a TAN-kind of party are sincerely concerned about the demise of traditional Christian values in the multicultural, multireligious and largely secularised society today. Their attachment to the Christian heritage is not a matter of political expediency but rooted in their Christian faith. In their view, voting for a TAN-kind of party is better than supporting the programme of another party when it comes to defending these values and this heritage.

## **7. Evangelical response**

How can or should churches respond to the upsurge of nationalism in general, and in particular to the way in which it plays a key-role in populist movements? Here are some possible ways of reflection and action, which leave it to each of us to respond in a concrete way.

### **7.1 Biblical teaching on nationhood and identity**

To begin with, there is an urgent need for consistent biblical teaching on the relation between nationhood and faith identity in our churches and organisations, and how to live together as different neighbouring nations. We can only briefly touch on this, by making three points:

#### **7.1.1 The particular and the universal**

There are two lines in the Bible that should be kept in balance: the particular line of Israel and the other nations, tribes and peoples, each of which has a specific identity and historical experience – and the universal line that all people share the same human dignity as created in the image of God and that all people are the object of salvation through Jesus Christ. These lines are clearly visible in Paul's address to the philosophers on the Areopagus:

From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us (Acts 17:26-27).

These are the two lines of national people Israel on the one hand and the spiritual people of the Church that run parallel, even in the final consummation of the new creation.<sup>24</sup>

#### **7.1.2 Positive and negative side of nationhood**

In her article on nationalism that I already quoted before, Rosemary Caldwell insists that we should keep the balance between the two ways in which the Bible speaks about nationhood. On the one hand, tribes, peoples and nations have a place in God's purposes, providing a sense of common identity, security and purpose. It is through the diversity of nations, languages and countries that humanity fulfils its cultural mandate. The differences between cultures create boundaries and a certain degree of dispersion of the human family, but this is precisely how God restrains the will of some to dominate others, and how he

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<sup>24</sup> Notice that the New Jerusalem, picture of the new creation, bears the name of the capital of Israel and has the names of 24 Jews on its gates and foundation stones, while her king is Jesus Messiah, the Jewish King of the Jews. The gates are open for all nations. Apparently, nationhood is part of the new creation (Revelation 22).

prevents the potentially limitless evil of a fallen human race once it is unified.<sup>25</sup> But even empires, for all the oppression they bring with them, can be instrumental in upholding good things and advancing the work of God.

On the other hand, from Genesis 11 onwards the Biblical authors also see the nations in a negative light. The pride and arrogance exhibited in the building of the tower of Babel result in the Lord's discipline: division and mutual incomprehension. The blessed state of the human family, characterised by unity and coherence, has been transformed into a relationship of irritation, alienation and insecurity.

In articulating a Biblical view on nationhood we should therefore strike a balance between the positive aspect of diversity of cultures in response to the divine culture mandate and the negative aspect of fragmentation, division, competition and rivalry. The nations are the communities that arise in the course of human history, now affected by sin, but also upheld by both the blessing and judgement of God's sovereign rule over human life on earth.

### **7.1.3 National identity and faith identity in Christ**

Furthermore, there is a balance to be maintained between national identity and faith identity in Christ. Christians have a 'dual nationality' so to speak. They are called to live out their eternal Christian identity that transcends ethnic and cultural boundaries, within the earthly community of which they are part, as part of the people to which they belong, ethnically, culturally, and/or politically.

The distinctions of nation, ethnic origin, gender and social status cease to be relevant to their standing before God or one another (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11). That is the universal aspect of the Gospel and of the Church, Body of Christ. But this is not to say that these aspect of human identity no longer exists, or that they become irrelevant. The distinctive ethnic and cultural identities of believers remain. Paul is still aware of himself as being part of the Jewish nation, ethnically, culturally and even religiously. He follows the traditions of his people, but he insists that these should not be imposed on non-Jewish believers. There is diversity of expressions of the Christian life. Unity in Christ is not uniformity, it presupposes the diversity of tribes, peoples, nations and their cultures.

### **7.2 Patriotism: inclusive and peaceful nationalism**

What are the conditions for Christian support of nationalism, rightly understood? Our Christian identity is incompatible with a form of nationalism which recognises only the good of its own people and seeks only its own fulfilment, neglecting the rights of others. The antidote to such nationalism is patriotism, a love of one's own country that recognises the same rights of every other nation. Patriotism is a good basis for seeking collaboration and mutual exchange between different nations.

Christians will oppose *exclusive* nationalism, in which people of other ethnic and cultural origin are rejected, and *militant* nationalism, that wants to impose itself on other nations. Instead, Christians can support an *inclusive* and *peaceful* nationalism, which is the same as patriotism. It cares for refugees and welcomes migrants who want to become part of and contribute to the ongoing historical experience of the nation. A patriotic love for one's country is quite compatible with the European idea of collaboration and integration.

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<sup>25</sup> Caldwell, *op. cit.* Missiologist Christopher J. H. Wright makes the same point in *The Mission of God* (Nottingham: IVP, 2004), p. 216.

### **7.3 Biblical social values: hospitality and integration**

Faced with the rise of nationalism and the rejection of newcomers, we need to emphasise the fundamental biblical social values: the dignity of each human being as created in the image of God; solidarity between rich and poor; hospitality for refugees and asylum seekers who are fleeing oppression, war, natural catastrophes or ecological disasters. In the Old Testament, “strangers” were welcome to live in Israel and to participate in the life and the religion of Israel. In so doing, they become part of its national history and its future. We could translate this principle by the term “inclusive patriotism”, which means that there is place for immigrants who want to integrate in our society and contribute to the ongoing story of our nation.

### **7.4 The “neighbourly love” of a responsible society**

An important principle of both Catholic and Reformed Protestant social teaching is that the commandment to love our neighbours also applies to the relations between different peoples, countries and states. The Christian Democratic movement of the twentieth century called this the principle of the responsible society. “Our” people and “our” country have a responsibility towards neighbouring people and countries; the practice of solidarity extends beyond our own borders.

Here we have the essence of the European ideal. Nations in Europe are neighbours, part of a family of nations or cultures. Given their common roots, their common (Christian) religious heritage (Christianity) and their common historical experience, they have the responsibility to collaborate for the common good of the whole of Europe. This was the founding principle of the process of European integration that has resulted in the current European Union.

### **7.5 Connect with the voters of populist/patriotic parties**

Churches have a responsibility towards those who vote for populist parties. Mainline political parties have lost contact with these voters. And churches too have largely lost contact with them, even though many of them are nominal church members, while quite a few of them are practising Christians. Can they share their views in the faith community? Do pastors who are critical of TAN kind of parties listen to the concerns of the people who vote for them, including the members of their own congregation?

### **7.6 Christian heritage as a bridge**

We saw that the attachment of populist leaders and their voters to the Christian cultural heritage has more to do with Christian culture than with Christian faith. But should we therefore ignore or even refute this attachment? We too are concerned about the preservation of the Christian heritage and we can make this a common cause. We can then use this concern as a bridge to communicate what the Christian faith really means.

Whilst we are right to be concerned at the resurgence of nationalism across Europe, this is also a moment for the Church to engage creatively with this new political landscape, to speak prophetically into this contested space, and to point uncompromisingly to the only one who truly brings freedom, liberty and hope to Europe: Jesus Christ.

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