Populism in the Land of Equality

Cross-Party Consensus in the Face of Extremism

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In many European countries, right-wing populist forces are currently trying to claim ownership of issues such as religious freedom and "Christian (family) values." The idea seems to be that open democracy places Christianity under threat. The detachment from the context of human rights and discussions of how we can live together peacefully in multi-religious societies with shared common ground in discourse and law blurs the concepts of freedom and democracy.

However, in the case of Norway, it can be observed that neither the topics of "religious freedom" nor "gender ideology" vs. "Christian values" are central targets of right-wing populist appropriation and reinterpretation; rather, the Norwegian Progress Party – the most influential right-wing populist force in the country – focuses on a different human right in its attempts at appropriation: gender equality. This chapter describes these peculiarities and offers explanations of how these trends have come about.

The role of religious freedom in Norwegian politics

In Norway, all parties except the Progress Party have included a section on freedom of religion or belief in their party programmes. Some political groups like to more strongly emphasise the Christian aspects; however, in general there is a broad understanding of the advantages of freedom of religion or belief. The broad support means that religious freedom is not controversially politicised.

Moreover, this situation has a historical and material basis. After the ties between the state and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Norway were dissolved a few years ago, the agreement was that the Church of Norway would continue with some legal and constitutional ties to the state for practical and

historical reasons.[1] During the 16th century Reformation, the (Danish) Crown took the Catholic Church's property, finances and priests in Norway, which was a Danish colony at the time. Not honouring the lasting responsibility that came with this takeover when the (now) Norwegian state no longer wanted any church ties would be equal to historical robbery. The solution is that religion is still financed by the national budget, but now various organised religious communities (including the secular humanists!) above a minimum size receive a sum approximately equivalent to the *pro capita* sum that the Church of Norway receives. This solution means that everyone feels they are well served with the status quo, and freedom of religion is a no-brainer.

One can speculate why the Norwegian Progress Party has taken a different route than many of its international sister parties in questions relating to gender and freedom of religion. A symptom of the different route is that given the current political polarisation in the USA, the current leader Sylvi Listhaug broke the tradition of previous Progress Party leaders attending the annual meeting of the U.S. Republican Party this year (2023).

Some traits in the roots of this party may explain its difference from populist parties elsewhere in Europe. In the 1970s, it started as a populist party opposed to the famously high Scandinavian taxes, Value Added Tax (VAT) and state monopolies on the sale of alcohol. While Christians across the political spectrum agreed that restrictive alcohol policies were positive, the Progress Party took a radically different stance. In this and other respects, they made little effort to appeal to conservative Christians.

Only recently – after populist parties in many countries have become a power to reckon with – has the current leader Sylvi Listhaug started to don a crucifix around her neck, and the party has aligned itself more with Christian-populist parties elsewhere in Europe. Nonetheless, the crucifix does not make up for an embarrassing ignorance about Christianity in the party in general, although it has perhaps somewhat improved with the recent attraction of Christian voters. Traditionally, Norwegian clergy and crucifix-wearing Christians voted for the Christian-Democratic party, merging the Christian love of one's neighbour and the baptismal formula "you are all one" with the Social Democratic "you are all equal." This broad coalition has secured Norway's strong engagement in international humanitarian and peace-keeping efforts.

1 Constitution of the Kingdom of Norway (1814/2023), § 2 and 4, https://lovdata.no/dokument/NLE/lov/1814-05-17, accessed on: 4 Jun. 2023.

"Gender ideology" vs. "traditional Christianity": Not a winning issue for populists in Norway

In general, it is striking that unlike in many other European and Western countries, the narrative of "Christian values" and their defence – which is particularly popular among right-wing populists[2] – hardly plays a role in the political discussion in Norway, not even in the thematic field of gender and family, which is one of the favourite topics of populists for culture wars elsewhere. This section summarises reasons for this trend.

Realized gender equality immunizes against anti-feminist populism

Traditional, Christian thought is often nodded to in the international, right-wing populist repertoire on gender and family. Various expressions are gathered on the internet (blogs, web pages, etc.), where international, comprehensive discourse and content-sharing is taking place among the like-minded.[3] Thus, the internet also facilitates the assertion of Christian points of reference for political purposes, especially regarding gender, equality and family. Important platforms for the spread of populist gender ideology belong in the domains of the two former superpowers, the USA and the former Soviet Union.[4]

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2 I will not deal with theology as such, but observe that a religion whose first writer (St. Paul) transmitted the earliest baptismal confession ("There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Galatians 3:28) is taken hostage under a modern populist-reactionary politics of gender, at the expense of more central, theological questions than the issue of whether a woman should take on paid work in addition to caring for any children and husbands. I use the word "reactionary" because I see populisms more as radical reactions to recent events than as conservative continuities of past religious tradition.

3 Mazzoleni, Gianpietro: "Populism is Better Understood in its Relation with the Media," in: Mojca Pajnik/Birgit Sauer (eds.), Populism and the Web: Communicative Practices of Parties and Movements in Europe. London: Routledge 2018, unpaginated preface; Zuckerberg, Donna: Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2018.

4 In Økland, Jorunn: "Populisme i likestillingslandet," in: Kristin Graff Kallevåg/Sven Thore Kloster/Sturla J. Stålsett (eds.), Populisme og kristendom, Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk 2021, pp. 68–85, on which this chapter is based, I develop the concept of "internet populism" in more detail and scope.

However, while such gender ideology may enjoy a sort of eternal life on the internet, being accessible to all parties, movements or individuals across the globe who seek it out, it conceals deep differences and tensions on the ground. For example, much of this repertoire is off the populist agenda in Norway, despite – or perhaps because of – the country's strong, conservative religious heritage. Today, institutions, laws, and most religious communities operate based on more inclusive notions of gender equality and freedom that function very well according to all parameters: in fact, in 2012, the then Prime Minister of Norway, the economist Jens Stoltenberg (who is now NATO Secretary General), said that "the Minister of Finance should thank Norwegian women every day!" His point was that Norwegian wealth and welfare systems are – contrary to what many assume – *not* primarily built on revenues from North Sea oil, but rather the near full participation of women in the paid workforce: "If the participation of Norwegian women in the work force had been reduced to the OECD average, the value loss would exceed the value of the Norwegian oil fund combined with the projected future value of the oil still under the (North) seabed."[5]

This quote illustrates why populist versions of Christian family values are not particularly compatible with material "facts on the ground" in Norway, and are therefore not found to be rational or appealing even among adherents of the parliamentary party most often identified with right-wing populism, the "Progress Party."[6] Compared to international populist trends, even the Progress Party may come across as feminist and secular.

The deterring effect of extremism: How Breivik's anti-feminist 2083 manifesto turned "Christian values" into a narrative that not even right-wing populists want to be associated with

I make a clear distinction here between populism's *substantive-content* and *strategic-political* sides. Populism – and extremism – may borrow from traditionally Christian theologies of gender and family content-wise (*substantive*), but they strongly differ in how they mobilise the value systems for their respective *strategies* (political demagoguery or violence). If "the people" share their view on the substance (for example "Christian family values"), populists

5 NTB – The Norwegian News Agency: "Kvinnejobber mer verdt enn oljen" (8 Mar. 2012), https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/3JOEv/kvinnejobber-mer-verdt-mer-enn-oljen, accessed on: 1 Jun. 2023.

6 Fremskrittspartiet (Progress Party), https://www.frp.no, accessed on: 25 Sep. 2023.

can rightly claim to represent the people and their true will.[7] Populism and extremism can further share views on the content substance of freedom of religion and how far it should reach, and they tend to share an enemy image of equality, feminism and feminists. What separates them is the strategy for implementing policy content. Where populism engages in political struggle, extremism takes up arms.

The point of this delineation of the distinctions between populist and extremist takeovers of an established body of thought regarding values, gender and family is as follows: when examining the *content* sides of populist ideology, it can also be relevant to draw in written sources that are usually understood as right-wing extreme, and consider how they represent traditional Christian views. "Traditional values" in Norway are still associated with historical Christianity, fixed roles for men and women, and the white, patriarchal, heterosexual nuclear family, even if a deeper understanding of what it entails is lost.

I will select an example that is uncomfortably close at hand – the "manifesto" behind the terrorist attacks on the Oslo Government Headquarters and Utøya island's Labour youth camp on 22 July 2011, killing 77 people – to define what is Christian and what is not according to the extremist by analysing his own uses of the label "Christian" about thinking, identity, tradition, etc.[8]

Hours before the attack, the pseudonym Andrew Berwick (Anders B. Breivik) sent his over 1,500-page manifesto "2083 – A European Declaration of Independence" to an e-mail list.[9] The version referred to here is the one published only two days later, on The Washington Post's website.[10] "2083" is mostly an edited and annotated collage of fragments from the internet. The introduction asserts that Muslim immigrants and feminists together with multiculturalists are working to destroy Christian Europe. Accordingly, European men must go to war to take back authority, to rescue Europe. In illustrations and the subtitle "De Laude Novae Militiae Pauperes commili-

7 Graff-Kallevåg, Kristin/Kloster, Sven Thore/Stålsett, Sturla J.: "Kapittel 1: Populisme og kristendom – kollisjon eller koalisjon?," in: Kristin Graff-Kallevåg, Sven Thore Kloster, Sturla J. Stålsett (eds.), Populisme og kristendom, Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk 2021, pp. 13–28, p. 20.

8 Graff-Kallevåg: Populisme.

9 The presentation is based on my previous publications in the area, such as Økland, Jorunn: "Feminismen, tradisjonen, og forventning," in Anders Ravik Jupskås (ed.), Akademiske perspektiver på 22. Juli, Oslo: Akademika 2013, pp. 115–128.

10 This near-original manifesto was not paginated, so page numbers are approximate.

tones Christi Templique Solomonici," Breivik stages himself within a military-Christian-religious framework, as a pioneer, commander and Templar.

Initially, the terrorist's anti-feminism was relatively frequently noted in the media, since his main target on Utøya island had been former Prime Minister (and among many other things also former Director-General of the World Health Organization) Gro Harlem Brundtland. Multiculturalism and islamophobia came to dominate the further discussion.

The manifesto's invocation of Christian authority and tradition never caught noticeable public attention, despite the fact that the single word "Christian" is found one or more times on over one-third of the 1,518 pages. By comparison, "multicult-" is found as part of a compound on "only" 453 pages. In my opinion, this lack of address of the very frequent Christian references is due to the religious illiteracy among Norway's "chattering" and writing classes, which again means that few commentators and researchers ever noticed the way in which Breivik operationalised European Christian heritage for terrorist purposes. However, the Norwegian right-wing-populist blogger Fjordman – for example from whom Breivik also copy-pasted 39 full essays into "2083" ("Fjordman" is mentioned on 76 pages) – felt abused. On his blog (now removed), Fjordman had repeatedly warned against Muslim immigration to Europe and the loss of European, "Christian" values.[11] The journalist and writer Anja Sletteland – who had long been worried about right-wing populists like Fjordman – concluded shortly after the attack that "it is time we realise that the anti-Islamic, anti-social democratic and anti-feminist 'underdog' has become a power factor in Norway."[12]

Sletteland was soon followed by other commentators who noted to their surprise that most of the manifesto's ideological content is not extremist in the meaning of inciting violence. Nonetheless, it spread conspiracy theories and assessments that were increasingly heard from populists around Europe, Russia and the USA. Therefore, it took days before investigators and journalists connected the manifesto with the terrorist act.

However, in its latter "Further Studies" part, the manifesto includes an interview with the "Justiciar Knight Commander of the PCCTS, Knights Templar," commonly believed to be a fictive interview that Breivik conducts with

11 Strømmen argues that Fjordman was a full-blown fascist who inspired Breivik's extremism, see Strømmen, Øyvind: Det mørke nettet: Om høyreekstremisme, kontrajihadisme og terror i Europa, Oslo: Cappelen Damm 2011.

12 Sletteland, Anja: "Kommentar," in: Dagens Næringsliv (2 Aug. 2011), p. 3.

himself.[13] In general, it is on the final 150 pages of the manifesto that he is most visibly present as an author, not only a copy-pasting editor. He proposes an extremist-militant *strategy* to reach a *final solution* (including death lists on the final pages):[14]

> "Obviously, the PCCTS, Knights Templar does not have mass appeal as we are a relatively cynical/cruel/goal oriented armed resistance group. However, our primary foundational principles (…) still have mass appeal and are supported by as many as 50–60% of all Europeans. … Of course, this does not mean that we will use less brutal methods in our operations. It only means that our foundational ideological principles will have mass appeal to a majority of Europeans. In comparison, the foundational principles of National Socialism or white supremacy groups in general does not have mass appeal and is supported by less than 10%, in many countries less than 5%."[15]

The manifesto's extremist "launch" on 22 July 2011 threw all of the populist, copy-pasted content and the more or less involuntary contributors into an extremist spotlight. Thus, the distinction that I make in this essay between different ways of operationalising overlapping ideological content (populist or extremist) was confirmed – including by the manifesto author himself – in the fictive interview towards the end.

It should be mentioned in passing that the summer of 2019, Norway was close to experiencing another terrorist act by a single, young white male: having been radicalised while attending a one-year Christian college programme (*"Folkehøyskole"*), Philip Manshaus killed his own seventeen-year old adopted sister Johanne Zhangjia Ihle-Hansen (born in China) in a leafy suburb outside Oslo, before he approached the local mosque with the intention to kill Muslim (immigrant) men gathered for prayer. Two retired men who had arrived early managed to prevent further killings by seizing the heavily armed young man and holding him until the police arrived. No one has found reason to blame the

13 Berwick, Andrew: 2083: A European Declaration of Independence, pp. 1349 ff., http://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2011/07/24/National-Politics/Graphics/2083+-+A+European+Declaration+of+Independence.pdf, accessed on: 24 Jul. 2011.

14 He shares personal reflections and experiences during the preparation phases, bomb and explosive production, preparation of the terrorist attack including schedule/log of the preparations July 1–22 (pp. 1437–1472).

15 Berwick: 2083, p. 1381.

Christian college, but perhaps there needs to be an increased awareness of how to phrase the legitimate desire that Christianity will survive in Europe. Unlike Breivik, Manshaus did not leave clues in writing.[16]

Gender equality as a populist value?

Much of what the "2083" manifesto presents as the "traditional" gender order is barely 100 years old, not preceding the industrial revolution. It is therefore not "traduced" over centuries. The leap from *the* manifesto's "traditional" gender order to the Progress Party could not have been greater. As previously mentioned, it arose as a populist reaction, male-heavy and secular. The party opposes gender quotas, with meritocratic arguments. Nonetheless, since 2006 the party leaders have been women. One female leader more or less appointed her successors: another woman, as well as a man who gave up a brilliant career as a politician to follow his wife for her dream job in the USA and was "ordered" to return for a comeback. In the case of another high-profile couple in the party's inner circle, it was the wife who became a government minister. While I could continue, the examples illustrate a distinctive feature of populist currents in today's Norway, namely that "real populists" do not practice gender-conservative ideology. The Progress Party in particular has done much to incorporate gender equality as part of its populism. This leads to the rhetoric being different from the kind of populist rhetoric that we find elsewhere in Europe and on the global internet, where it is about returning to patriarchal family values. Indeed, the visible leadership figures in the Church of Norway also do not use such rhetoric, this is why the quasi-religious, patriarchal gender ideology in the online "2083" manifesto crashes so completely in Norwegian "facts on the ground."

Has "equality" as a value then assumed a new function as an important marker of difference in the populist rhetorical distinction between "ethnic Norwegians" and "immigrants"? Absolutely. Whether intended or not, the effect of the Progress Party taking ownership of "state feminism"[17] is that they gain more ammunition for another of their core causes: immigration. When

16 But see Hammer, Anders: Terroristen fra Bærum – Radikaliseringen av Philip Manshaus, Oslo: Stenersen 2022.

17 Hernes, Helga M.: Welfare State and Woman Power: Essays in State Feminism, Oslo/Oxford: Norwegian University Press 1987.

refugees come to Norway, they are already trained in gender equality at the asylum reception centres, and the Progress Party is particularly keen to protect Norwegians against immigrant influence from foreign patriarchal cultures.

The historical backdrop may explain some of the curiosities described: after Norway became independent in 1905, males were in sole control of the Parliament (*Storting*) for only eight years before the country became the world's first *independent* nation to introduce universal female suffrage in 1913. The front fighters for the women's vote had received their leadership training in priestly families, as wives and daughters running the vicarage. Naturally, this has affected Norwegian collective self-understanding. When the *Storting* discussed the opening of *all* public offices for women in 1911/12, only the parliament president's double vote ensured that the proposal did not go through, with gender-exclusive exceptions being made for clerical and military offices.[18] The "2083" manifesto's dream of returning to a past with Christian patriarchs and submissive, pious wives thus crashes not only in today's Norwegian political and ecclesiastical reality but also in Norwegian history.

This backdrop further undermines explanations of anti-equality populism in Norway with reference to men's experience of a loss of superiority as a result of new equality policies.

Breivik and Manshaus related to an abstract *populus* on the internet, while Norway's *populus* moved to another place over a century ago.[19] This in turn illustrates how "populism" remains difficult to pin down ideologically in relation to "democracy," because the perception of the people on behalf of whom one claims to speak is constantly changing and varies between countries.

Conclusion

In the Norwegian context, there is reason to question how *Christian* "traditional" family values are, how *traditional* they are if they arose in the late-19th century, and how *Norwegian* they are, given that women have been full citizens in Norway almost from the day of its independence. When Norwegian internet populists yearn for a past that never existed, it is therefore important to meet

18 Hinnaland Stendal, Synnøve: "... under forvandlingens lov": En analyse av Stortingsdebatten om kvinnelige prester i 1930-årene, Lund: Arcus 2003.

19 Brubaker, Rogers: "Why Populism?," in: Theory and Society 46 (2017), pp. 357–385, p. 373.

their universalist claims with concrete stories from Norwegian political and religious history. I assume that this also applies to other countries.

The chapter has presented the cognitive dissonance that arises in the gap between a manifesto mainly composed by copying and pasting from the global populist internet and the conditions on the ground in Norway, in church, history and the political practice of politics. The brief explanation concerning why populism seems to be less attractive as a political ideology in Norway is that: first, people have seen and experienced for themselves the beneficial results of an equality-based society where people are not pitted against each other; second, the recent right-wing extremist terror attack in Oslo in 2011 (and 2019) put the ugly face of right-wing ideology on display; and third, even populist rhetoric has to incorporate gender equality to remain plausible and appealing. It is too early to say how this will align Norwegian-style populism with populism elsewhere in Europe.

The first part of this chapter prepared for what came in the second part: in a country where right-wing populism is not a significant political force on the ground, populist ideas about a Christian Europe threatened by immigration, Islam and falling birth rates among white people are still available via the internet. I acknowledge the presence of such arguments in populist political discourse, and distinguish them from extremist uses of the same ideas. Indeed, the distinction is found in the "2083" manifesto itself. Nonetheless, in Norway it was this general populist discourse that took control over two young, white, vulnerable males who proceeded to engage in violent action. Norway has learnt the hard way that populist rhetoric should not be excused or underestimated, as with certain recipients it can lead to extremist action.