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# **The ghost in the machine:**

## **Brexit, populism, and the sacralisation of politics**

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### **Abstract**

The current global wave of populism has fuelled a surge in scholarly interest but the links between populism and religion remain under-researched and most studies have centred on cases where religion remains socially and politically influential. This paper contributes to developing studies in this area by analysing the use of religious tropes and themes in a comparatively non-religious context, examining the populist discourse that was constructed to promote Britain's withdrawal from the European Union ('Brexit'). Drawing on neo-Durkheimian ideas about the endurance of the 'sacred' in social organisation, it identifies three core themes: (1) a framing of the EU as a 'folk devil' and an existential threat to the liberty and prosperity of the British nation, (2) a presentation of Brexit as a source of national rebirth and salvation, underpinned by an exceptionalist view of the British people who were said to possess a unique global destiny, and (3) a sacralisation of 'the People' into an homogenous mass whose Will was to be enacted at all costs in the aftermath of the referendum. The study shows how populists are able to draw on a religious repertoire to mobilise voters, even in contexts that are largely non-religious.

**Keywords:** Brexit, religion, discourse, populism, sacred

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This study contributes to a growing body of work exploring the links between populism and religion by examining the use, by populist actors, of religious themes in a secularised context. To date, the links between religion and populism remain under-researched and most studies have tended to focus on cases where religion remains socially and politically influential.<sup>2</sup> Here, scholars have highlighted a number of links between populism and religion. Populists frequently seek to mobilise religious communities, use religious identity markers as part of a process of othering, and seek to construct a view of the political realm by utilising tropes, motifs, and themes that are drawn from a religious repertoire. Framing the political world as a struggle between the virtuous ‘people’ and their morally contemptible foes, populists often utilise discursive frames which invoke ‘exceptionalist’ notions of a unique, chosen people, warnings of an existential threat to a sacred homeland, and claims that the populist project offers the only route to national salvation and the fulfilment of a manifest destiny.

Because the majority of research in this area has focused on countries where religion holds a substantial degree of socio-political influence, comparatively non-religious, secularised settings remain notably under-explored. A key gap in the available literature, then, is a consideration of whether, and to what extent, populists seek to mobilise voters by highlighting religious themes and tropes in secularised political contexts. Drawing on insights from neo-Durkheimian theory concerning the role of the sacred in social organisation, we aim here to address this gap, through a study of the ways in which populist rhetoric utilised a number of

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their detailed and insightful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> For instance see Andrew Arato and Jean. L. Cohen, ‘Civil society, populism and religion’, *Constellations* 24:3 (2017): pp.283-95; Andrew, L. Whitehead, Samuel, L. Perry and Joseph, O. Baker, J. O, ‘Make America Christian again: Christian nationalism and voting for Donald Trump’, *Sociology of Religion* 79:2 (2018): pp.147-171; Jeffrey Haynes, ‘Right-wing populism and religion in Europe and the USA’, *Religions* 11:10 (2020): pp.490-508; Thorsten Wojczewski, ‘Populism, Hindu nationalism, and foreign policy in India: The Politics of Representing “the People”’, *International Studies Review* 22:3 (2020): pp.396-422; Ihsan Yilmaz and Nicholas Morieson, ‘A systematic literature review of populism, religion and emotions’, *Religions* 12:4 (2021): pp.272-294.

religious themes and tropes to promote the idea of Britain's withdrawal from the European Union.

In doing so, we aim to build on previous literature noting 'an elective affinity' between populist rhetoric and religious tropes, motifs, and ideas. Specifically, our research highlights three main Brexit frames that were rooted in religious themes: (1) a framing of the European Union as a populist 'folk-devil', and an existential threat to the liberty and prosperity of the British nation; (2) a presentation of Brexit as a source of national rebirth and salvation, underpinned by an exceptionalist view of the British people, who were said to possess a unique global destiny; and (3) a sacralisation of 'the People' into an homogenous mass whose Will was to be enacted at all costs in the aftermath of the referendum. Our overall contribution here is to show that, even in contexts where populists may avoid explicitly religious discourse, or where the key aim is not to direct their appeal towards religious communities, populist actors are often drawn towards utilising quasi-religious repertoires to mobilise voters. In the case of Brexit, the religious themes which we identify here were skilfully employed by leading Brexit politicians to imbue their political project with the status of an almost sacred process which was to be treated as an act of faith and placed beyond any formal opposition or reproach. In light of this, the paper seeks to make a wider contribution to the growing literature on the relationship between religion and politics by showing that, even in non-religious contexts where formal religious language is not being directly evoked, there is a closer relationship between religion and politics than is often acknowledged and that populism, in particular, has played a key role in cementing that relationship.

The article is divided into three key sections. First, it discusses the links between populism and religion, highlighting the rationale and methodology for the research. Second, we examine the use of the three core religious frames in the case of Brexit. Finally, we discuss the implications and potential limitations of these findings and make some suggestions for future research.

## Populism and religion

In recent years the global political landscape has been transformed by a populist wave, producing dramatic and often unexpected electoral outcomes in countries as diverse as the United States, Brazil, India, Greece, Hungary, and Britain. This spread of populist insurgency has attracted a large volume of scholarly attention, across a variety of themes. These include debates around the definition of populism – variously seen as an ideology,<sup>3</sup> a performative style of politics,<sup>4</sup> a form of discourse,<sup>5</sup> and as a type of political strategy<sup>6</sup> – the varieties of populism, which range from its general forms<sup>7</sup> to specific national and regional manifestations;<sup>8</sup> the underlying causes of populism,<sup>9</sup> as well as its impact on processes of democratic governance,<sup>10</sup> economic policy,<sup>11</sup> political parties,<sup>12</sup> and the media.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cas Mudde, 'The populist zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition* 39: (2004): pp.541-563.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Jagers and Stefaan Walgrave, 'Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium', *European Journal of Political Research* 46:3 (2007): pp.319–45; Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey, 'Rethinking populism: Politics, mediatisation and political style', *Political Studies* 62:2 (2014): pp.381–397.

<sup>5</sup> Paris Aslanidis, 'Is populism an ideology? A refutation and a new perspective', *Political Studies* 64:1 (2016): pp.88-104; Benjamin De Cleen and Yannis Stavrakakis, 'Distinctions and articulations: A discourse theoretical framework for the study of populism and nationalism', *Javnost – The Public Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture* 24:4 (2017): pp.301-319.

<sup>6</sup> Kurt Weyland, 'Clarifying a contested concept: Populism in the study of Latin American politics', *Comparative Politics* 34:1 (2001): pp.1–22.

<sup>7</sup> Cas Mudde and Cristobal Kaltwasser, 'Exclusionary vs. inclusionary populism: Comparing contemporary Europe and Latin America', *Government and Opposition* 48:2 (2013): pp.147–174.

<sup>8</sup> Sergiu Gherghina, Sergiu Mişcoiu and Sorina Soare (eds) *Contemporary Populism: A Controversial Concept and Its Diverse Forms* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2013); Urpo Kovala, Emilia Palonen, Maria Ruotsalainen and Tuija Saesma (eds) *Populism on the Loose* (Finland: Jyväskylän Yliopisto, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Andrej Zaslove, 'Here to stay? Populism as a new party type', *European Review* 16:3 (2008): pp.319–336; Rogers Brubaker, 'Why populism?' *Theory and Society* 46 (2017): pp.357-385.

<sup>10</sup> Gianfranco Pasquino, 'Populism and democracy', in Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (eds), *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008); Cristobal Kaltwasser, 'The ambivalence of populism: threat and corrective for democracy', *Democratization* 19:2 (2012): pp.184-208.

<sup>11</sup> Daron Acemoglu, Georgy Egorov Konstantin Sonin, 'A political theory of populism', *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 128:2 (2013): pp.771-805.

<sup>12</sup> Alfio Mastropaolo, 'Politics Against Democracy: Party Withdrawal and Populist Breakthrough', in Albertazzi and McDonnell (eds), *Twenty-First Century Populism*.

<sup>13</sup> Sven Engesser, Nicole Ernst, Frank Esser and Florin Büchel, 'Populism and social media: how politicians spread a fragmented ideology', *Information, Communication and Society* 20:8 (2017): pp.1109-1126; Gianpietro Mazzoleni, 'Politics and the Media', in Albertazzi and McDonnell (eds), *Twenty-First Century Populism*.

One theme that remains relatively underdeveloped within these debates is the relationship between populism and religion. This is surprising, given that a number of populist leaders and parties have sought to cultivate links to religious groups and invoke religious themes as a way of enhancing their political appeal. Select examples here include the promotion of Hindu nationalism by the government of Narendra Modi in India, support for Islamist politics by governments in countries such as Turkey and Iran, the close relationship between Donald Trump and the Christian Right in the United States, and the weaponization of the supposed threat from Islam by right-wing populist groups in Europe.<sup>14</sup> Cases such as these highlight the common bonds that exist between populist and religious forces, yet such links have been largely overlooked within the literature. As Michael Hoelzl points out, the intersection of populism and religion is one that has been ‘frequently ignored’.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Jose Pedro Zúquete observes that, ‘the specific relationship between the phenomenon of populism and religion ... remains a neglected area of research’.<sup>16</sup>

The small number of scholars exploring these links have generated typologies designed to capture the core dynamics of the relationship between populism and religion. Classifications range from cases where politics and religion have become intertwined – often described as ‘religious populism’,<sup>17</sup> in which religious language, views, and ideals are overtly used as a way of shaping political platforms – to cases involving the explicit promotion of theological views by religious groups attempting to enter the political sphere,<sup>18</sup> and the cynical use of religious

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<sup>14</sup> Arato and Cohen, ‘Civil society, populism and religion’.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Hoelzl, ‘The new visibility of religion and its impact on populist politics’, *Religions* 11:6 (2020): pp.292-307.

<sup>16</sup> Jose Pedro Zúquete, ‘Populism and Religion’, in Cristobal Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulia Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Barbara-Ann J. Rieffer, ‘Religion and nationalism: Understanding the consequences of a complex relationship’, *Ethnicities* 3:2 (2003): pp.215–242; Arato and Cohen, ‘Civil society, populism and religion’; Wojczewski, ‘Populism, Hindu nationalism, and foreign policy in India’.

<sup>18</sup> Whitehead et al, ‘Make America Christian again’.

tropes by political leaders trying to mobilise sections of the population with appeals to markers of religious identity.<sup>19</sup>

Other scholars have also noted strong similarities between religious worldviews and the way in which populists seek to construct the political world. Here, it is noted that the populist narrative typically involves the creation of a binary opposition between a virtuous, morally superior public (expressed in the form of ‘the People’) and their impure, corrupt, and dishonest enemies (consisting of elites and outsiders). This Manichean framing, which closely mirrors fundamental religious dichotomies such as those between good and evil, faithful and apostate, or sacred and profane, has been described as ‘a modern form of political theology’<sup>20</sup> – a style of ‘missionary politics’<sup>21</sup> that sanctifies the idea of ‘the People’, turning a heterogeneous mix of conflicting social interests into a ‘quasi-religious notion’<sup>22</sup> with ‘a hidden and never fully accessible divinity’.<sup>23</sup> As Rogers Brubaker notes, ‘Populism depends on a kind of enchantment: on “faith” in the possibility of representing and speaking for “the people”’.<sup>24</sup>

From this perspective, the field of religion provides a repertoire of cultural tropes, motifs, and themes that populists can use as tools for political mobilisation, typically presenting themselves and their parties as vehicles of national salvation tasked with the historic role of defending the nation against a looming existential threat or liberating its people from a state of oppression.<sup>25</sup>

This often involves the use of metaphors grounded in a grand ‘eschatological myth’, framing the country as a sacred place with a chosen people whose destiny culminates in a great

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<sup>19</sup> Timothy Peace, ‘Religion and populism in Britain: an infertile breeding ground?’ in Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell and Olivier Roy (eds), *Saving the People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Daniel Nilsson DeHanas and Marat Shterin, ‘Religion and the rise of populism’, *Religion, State & Society* 46:3 (2018): pp.177-185; Haynes, ‘Right-wing populism and religion’.

<sup>20</sup> Arato and Cohen, ‘Civil society, populism and religion’, p.288.

<sup>21</sup> Rana Jawad, Daniel Béland and Emmanuele Pavolini, ‘State of the art: “The People” and their social rights: What is distinctive about the populism-religion-social policy nexus?’ *Social Policy and Society* 20:2 (2021): pp.267-281.

<sup>22</sup> Xin Mao, ‘The religiosity of populism’, *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 16:47 (2017): pp.62-75.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Arato, ‘Political theology and populism’, *Social Research* 80:1 (2013): pp.143-172.

<sup>24</sup> Brubaker, ‘Why populism?’ p.380.

<sup>25</sup> Hoelzl, ‘The new visibility of religion’.

‘redemptive future’.<sup>26</sup> As such, populist rhetoric has ‘an elective affinity with certain religious ideas or tropes’, including ‘themes of impending doom, the need to ward off evil others, to purge the people of corrupting blood, of sacrifice ... the portrayal of the world as a disaster and the country as lost in the wilderness’.<sup>27</sup>

These studies into the links between populism and religion help to identify and explain some of the key conceptual connections, but what remains missing from this literature is a consideration of the extent to which populists draw on religious themes in a secularised context. Most current research has focused on cases where religion holds a substantial degree of socio-political influence, with the result that comparatively non-religious, secularised settings remain notably under-researched. This is a significant gap which evokes a number of questions. For example, to the extent that populists commonly draw on religious themes as tools of political mobilisation, does the diminished influence of religion inhibit their ability to mobilise political support by utilising the cultural stores that religion can provide? Conversely, if populists can effectively deploy religious themes in a non-religious context, then does this suggest that religious ideas and resources are more deeply embedded in social and cultural systems than is often recognised (debates around the process of secularisation, for example, frequently take the diminished social influence of religion as a sign of religious decline)?<sup>28</sup>

This latter question has been addressed by scholars working at the wider intersection of politics and religion, who have highlighted the religious dimension of several non-populist political forms. Key examples here include cases of civil religion, where the political institutions, beliefs, and rituals of the state (typically focusing, in this instance, on the United States) are said to possess transcendent moral foundations;<sup>29</sup> political religion, a concept typically used to

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<sup>26</sup> Zúquete, ‘Populism and Religion’, p.452.

<sup>27</sup> Arato and Cohen, ‘Civil society, populism and religion’, p.291.

<sup>28</sup> For example see Detlef Pollack, ‘Varieties of secularization theories and their indispensable core’, *The Germanic Review* 90:2 (2015): pp.60-79.

<sup>29</sup> Marcela Cristi, ‘Durkheim’s Political Sociology: Civil Religion, Nationalism and Cosmopolitan’, in Annika Hvithmar, Margit Warburg and Brian Arly Jacobsen (eds) *Holy Nations and Global Identities: Civil Religion*,



explain communist and fascist regimes characterised by the overt worship of the state itself;<sup>30</sup> and varieties of nationalism, which, in their veneration of national symbols and narratives, have sometimes been seen as surrogate forms of religion, promoting expressions of faith in a higher power.<sup>31</sup> These studies have produced numerous insights into the multi-faceted and enduring connection between political and religious forces but are similarly limited in terms of their applicability in comparatively secularised contexts. As with much work into the links between populism and religion, scholars in these areas have tended to focus on cases where religion wields social and cultural influence or have centred their analysis on the state as a form of religion (in the case of totalitarian regimes), offering little explanatory value for understanding the use of religious themes in modern democratic, secularised societies.

### **The sacralisation of politics**

There are good reasons to think that the sacralisation of politics found in the cases above might also occur in comparatively secularised societies. Neo-Durkheimian theories of social organisation point to the endurance of a sacred modality as one of the core features of political life, independent of specific religious ideas and beliefs. From this perspective, a complex social order requires some form of ultimate, commonly held meaning if it is to effectively address the key dilemma of legitimacy facing a political community – namely, ‘the need to find a principle of grounding and solidity where an absolute foundation is definitively lacking’.<sup>32</sup> Without such

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*Nationalism, and Globalisation* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Rhys H. Williams, ‘Civil religion and the cultural politics of national identity in Obama’s America’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52:2 (2013): pp.239–257.

<sup>30</sup> Emilio Gentile, ‘Political religion: a concept and its critics – a critical survey’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6:1 (2005): pp.19-32; Hans Maier, ‘Political religion: a concept and its limitations’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 8:1 (2007): pp.5-16.

<sup>31</sup> Peter van der Veer, ‘Nationalism and religion’, in John Breuilly (ed), *Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Anthony Smith, ‘The sacred dimension of nationalism’, *Millennium* 29:3 (2000): pp.791-814; Yilmaz and Morieson, ‘A systematic literature review of populism, religion and emotions’.

<sup>32</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘Church, state, resistance’, *Journal of Law and Society* 34:1 (2007): pp.3-13, cit.p.9.

an ordering principle, a society risks succumbing to a Hobbesian conflict of incessant power struggles, lacking the overarching bonds required to provide a sense of social cohesion.

In religiously structured societies this cohesive element is derived from non-refutable theological assertions, providing members of the community with a ‘self-authorising authority’<sup>33</sup> on which to ground political claims. In this case, as Jurgen Habermas notes, the legitimacy of the social order is taken ‘from its own roots ... independently of politics’.<sup>34</sup> In societies where religion loses its place as the principal source of social unification, new forms of legitimation are required. Throughout the Western world the long process of secularisation that began with the Protestant Reformation led to the construction of a new social order rooted in secular concepts such as ‘sovereignty’, ‘the nation’, and ‘the people’. Although these constituent elements were formally devoid of formal religious affinities, their foundational assumptions continued to operate on a sacred register. In Carl Schmitt’s influential account of these changes, the new modes of social organisation developed by Western societies denoted the reworking of pre-existing religious ideas (the universal sovereignty of God, for example, being reformulated at the level of the state) turning them into ‘political theological concepts’.<sup>35</sup> As Gavin Rae concurs: ‘The modern constitutional state does not abandon the theological model, but alters the mode through which the structural understanding of theology is expressed’.<sup>36</sup> Or, as Andrew Arato explains, the modern construction of the political realm remains ‘founded in never fully accessible metanormative structures – deep-seated,

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<sup>33</sup> Stephen Hopgood, ‘Moral authority, modernity and the politics of the sacred’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 15:2 (2009): pp.229-255, cit.p. 235.

<sup>34</sup> Jurgen Habermas, “‘The Political’” The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology’, in Judith Butler, Jurgen Habermas, Charles Taylor and Cornell West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p.17.

<sup>35</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology, Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> Gavin Rae, *The Problem of Political Foundations in Carl Schmitt and Emmanuel Levinas* (London: Routledge, 2016), p.557.

unconscious assumptions that without being normative themselves determine the meaning of truth, justice, law within a socialpolitical order as a whole'.<sup>37</sup>

From this neo-Durkheimian viewpoint, the legitimising structures of modern, secularised societies are no longer arranged with reference to an external, self-validating authority, but are nonetheless seen to be rooted in categorical forms that remain sacralised, imbued with a sense of ultimate meaning that stands over, and provides the condition for, the mundane political world. Making the point, Marcela Cristi writes that: 'In modern society, the religiously based conscience collective fades away, but the sense of the sacred remains. It might be attached to ideas, flags or heads of states rather than to rocks, springs or ancestral animals, as human beings have an infinite capacity for "creating sacred things out of ordinary ones"'.<sup>38</sup>

These sacralised conceptual frames are accompanied by the use and production of political myths. These are defined as narrative constructions that enable a political community to acquire a sense of its own self-representation – a set of ideas about its core identity, its values, and its sense of collective belonging – forming a 'universal sociological mechanism' through which a society comes to understand itself and the place it has in the world.<sup>39</sup> In this way, political myths set 'the normative parameters of the nature of political authority and its use in a political community',<sup>40</sup> turning the generic constituent categories of legitimation into more detailed, particularised forms suited to the social group in question. These myths can assume a multitude of forms, and different groups within a society may hold and promote myths that compete with each other, but each provides a similar, essential function as a guide for interpreting events and

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<sup>37</sup> Arato, 'Political theology and populism', p.151.

<sup>38</sup> Cristi, 'Durkheim's Political Sociology', p.50.

<sup>39</sup> Gérard Bouchard, 'Social myths: A new approach', *Philosophy Study* 6:6 (2016): pp.356-366. Also see Christopher Flood, *Political Myth* (London: Routledge, 1996); Darren Kelsey, *Media and Affective Mythologies: Discourse, Archetypes and Ideology in Contemporary Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017).

<sup>40</sup> Vincent Della Sala, 'Political myth, mythology and the European Union', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 48:1 (2010): pp.1-19, cit.p. 3.

determining the most appropriate response to them. As Bryan Turner writes: ‘A political community cannot survive without powerful myths that draw on sacred forces’.<sup>41</sup>

According to Gérard Bouchard the creation of a political myth follows a regular pattern. The process typically begins with an ‘anchor’ point, ‘a particularly meaningful, determining experience that has occurred in the near or distant past of a collectivity’ that leaves an emotional ‘imprint’ in the social consciousness.<sup>42</sup> This anchor is then promoted by entrepreneurial political actors who seek to interpret this experience in a particular way, connecting it with, or translating it into, a set of values, ideals, and beliefs that the rest of the community can follow. In this process, these elements become transformed into ‘sacralised collective representations’, frequently invoking themes such as notions of a sacred homeland, ideas of a long-lost golden age, promises of a glorious future, symbolic historical events, dates, people, and so on, that are subsequently presented as social facts beyond doubt and rational challenge. Examples of such political myths discussed in the literature include ideas of ‘Imperial Mission’ in Britain and ‘Manifest Destiny’ in the United States,<sup>43</sup> claims about a ‘Clash of Civilisation’ between Islam and the West,<sup>44</sup> and the construction of a post-9/11 ‘War on Terror’.<sup>45</sup>

## **Analysing Brexit**

In what follows, we draw on these neo-Durkheimian insights to explore the use of religious themes by populists in a comparatively secularised context. We do so through an examination of the discourse that was employed to promote ‘Brexit’ – the UK’s decision to leave the

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<sup>41</sup> Bryan Turner, ‘Religion and politics: Nationalism, globalisation and empire’, *Asian Journal of Social Science* 34:2 (2006): pp.209-224, cit.p. 211; also see Michael Morden, ‘Anatomy of the national myth: archetypes and narrative in the study of nationalism’, *Nations and Nationalism* 22:3 (2016): pp.447–464; Herbert De Vriese, ‘Political myth and sacrifice’, *History of European Ideas* 43:7 (2017): pp.808-824.

<sup>42</sup> Bouchard, ‘Social myths’, p.358.

<sup>43</sup> Jeff D. Bass and Richard Cherwitz, ‘Imperial Mission and Manifest Destiny: A case study of political myth in rhetorical discourse’, *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 43: 3 (1978), pp.213-232.

<sup>44</sup> Chiara Bottici and Benoit Challand, ‘Rethinking political myth: The Clash of Civilisations as a self-fulfilling prophecy’, *European Journal of Social Theory* 9:3 (2006): pp.315-336.

<sup>45</sup> Joanne Esch, ‘Legitimising the “War on Terror”: Political myth in official-level rhetoric’, *Political Psychology* 31:3 (2010), pp.357-391.

European Union following a national referendum in 2016. This is an apposite case study because Brexit is widely considered to have been a populist political project,<sup>46</sup> and the UK is a largely secularised society in which religion exerts little formal control over public life. Key measures of religiosity (notably religious membership and attendance at a place of worship) have been progressively declining for several decades, and survey evidence shows that a majority of UK adults now identify as belonging to ‘no religion’.<sup>47</sup>

Scholars investigating the potential links between religion and Brexit have largely focused on voting behaviour, examining relative levels of support for the EU amongst different religious denominations.<sup>48</sup> These studies have yielded a number of valuable insights, particularly into religious conceptions of British national identity, but have left crucial aspects of the links between religion and Brexit unexplored, especially the extent to which religious themes were utilised by political actors to mobilise support for leaving the EU. To address this gap, our study analysed the discourse used by prominent Brexit activists during the referendum campaign and the period of political instability in the months that followed it. Our central empirical research consisted of the compilation of a dataset to capture the main sources of public communication from high-profile Leave campaigners. This covered a timeframe from the start of the referendum campaign in February 2016 to the third ‘meaningful vote’ on the UK’s Withdrawal Agreement at the end of March 2019. The dataset included transcripts of speeches taken from the UKPOL political speech archive ([www.ukpol.co.uk](http://www.ukpol.co.uk)), statements from the official Vote Leave website ([www.voteleavetakecontrol.org](http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org)) and press reports (such as news stories and interviews) collected from a comprehensive search of the media database,

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<sup>46</sup> For example see Michael Freeden, ‘After the Brexit referendum: revisiting populism as an ideology’, *Journal of Political Ideologies* 22:1 (2017): pp.1-11.

<sup>47</sup> See Steve Bruce, ‘Post-secularity and religion in Britain: an empirical assessment’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23:3 (2013): pp.369-384; British Social Attitudes 36 (NatCen, 2019) [https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39363/bsa\\_36.pdf](https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39363/bsa_36.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> For example see Greg Smith and Linda Woodhead, ‘Religion and Brexit: populism and the Church of England’, *Religion, State and Society* 46:3 (2018): pp.206-223; Ekaterina Kolpinskaya and Stuart Fox, ‘Praying on Brexit? Unpicking the effect of religion on support for European Union integration and membership’, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 57:3 (2019) pp.580-598.

LexisNexus. The dataset also included the text of more than one hundred debates, statements, and questions relating to Brexit taken from Hansard, the UK's official record of Parliamentary proceedings. Taken together, this yielded a corpus amounting to more than a million words. Following Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah Shannon, we conducted a manual qualitative content analysis that scrutinised the corpus for rhetorical phrases or patterns that might resonate with key themes from the literature on populism and religion.<sup>49</sup> This included sacralised notions of British exceptionalism, statements referring to the British as a unique, chosen people, references to their manifest destiny, the use of frames referring to the threat from malign external forces, as well as narratives of struggle and national rebirth. This analysis highlighted three key frames, commonly used to justify Britain's exit from the EU, which were infused with quasi-religious themes. The first of these centred around the promotion of a political myth tracing Britain's long-running economic and political decline to its decision to join the European project. In this framing, the EU was given the role of a populist 'folk-devil', an 'outsider' institution made culpable for a multitude of domestic problems and viewed as an existential threat to the liberty and prosperity of the UK through a combination of political regulations, unelected elites, and an unstoppable influx of foreign migrants. The second frame presented Brexit as the route to a great national rebirth. Rooted in the political myth of British exceptionalism, Brexit promised to free the British people from the shackles of the EU and allow the nation to fulfil its historic destiny as a buccaneering, free trading global leader. For the purposes of securing the project, the third frame sought to sacralise the mythical 'Will of the People' during a post-referendum struggle to define the meaning of 'Brexit'. In a highly politicised context following the referendum result, in which a number of competing factions sought to cement their own interpretation of Brexit, a dominant section of the Leave campaign

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<sup>49</sup> Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon, 'Three approaches to qualitative content analysis', *Qualitative Health Research*, 15:9 (2005): pp.1277-1288.

aimed to homogenise the 17.4 million Leave voters into a single, undifferentiated mass in order to uphold the implementation of a specific form of ‘hard Brexit’. The combined effect of these three frames was to elevate the Brexit project to the status of an almost sacred process which was to be treated by its followers as an act of faith and placed beyond any formal opposition or reproach. The following sections outline these thematic frames in more detail.

### **The EU as an existential threat**

The first core frame in the Brexit discourse presented the EU as a classic populist ‘folk-devil’,<sup>50</sup> said to be responsible for a multitude of domestic problems, ranging from pressures on public services to the implementation of austerity. In this frame, the EU was presented as a malign, external force posing an existential threat to the sovereignty, prosperity, and social fabric of the British nation. This frame worked as an ‘anchor point’ for the core idea of Brexit by promoting the political myth that Britain’s long term political, economic, and social difficulties could be traced back to a single, critical event – its decision to join the European Economic Community (later the EU) in 1973. At the heart of this frame was the idea that what was initially presented to the British people as a purely economic project had turned out to be an underhand political scheme to create a federal superstate, locking Britain into an oppressive, excessively centralised, and overly bureaucratic organisation, which was destroying British (and indeed European) democracy.<sup>51</sup>

This theme was effectively deployed by Boris Johnson, the future Prime Minister and one of the most prominent supporters of the Leave campaign. As he put it: ‘[t]o understand our predicament, and the trap we are in, we need to go back to the immediate post-war period’ with

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<sup>50</sup> Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (London: Routledge, 1972).

<sup>51</sup> On the framing of the EU as an external constraint, also see Veronika Koller, ‘Analysing Metaphor in Discourse’, in Christopher Hart (ed) *Researching Discourse: A Student Guide* (London: Routledge, 2020).

all the ‘agony and shame of a broken continent’. The EEC, he said, had once been a noble ambition, but had undergone ‘a spectacular metamorphosis’, transforming from an economic project to a ‘spiritually damaging’ system of political integration that was ‘becoming ever more centralising, interfering, and anti-democratic’.<sup>52</sup> In his view, the EU was threatening to assimilate Britain into a single, undifferentiated bloc. Thus, the ‘effort to build a country called Europe’ was creating a situation in which ‘[t]he independence of this country is being seriously compromised’.<sup>53</sup> This framing of the EU as a creeping threat to British liberty and democracy was widely promulgated by other high-profile Leave campaigners. Michael Gove (then Secretary of State for Justice), for example, claimed that the EU had been ‘designed purposely to frustrate democracy’<sup>54</sup> and was promoting ‘a fundamentally political agenda – to further the cause of European integration’.<sup>55</sup> Nigel Farage (the head of the UK Independence Party), who in 2010 had accused the-then President of the European Council, Herman van Rompuy, of having the ‘intention to be the quiet assassin of European democracy, and of the European nation states’,<sup>56</sup> suggested that the European Parliament had ‘by stealth, by deception, without ever telling the truth to the British ... imposed upon them a political union’.<sup>57</sup> The Conservative MP, Jacob Rees-Mogg, described the EU as ‘an imperial yoke’,<sup>58</sup> and later claimed that the UK would be turned into a ‘vassal state’ under the Withdrawal Agreement negotiated by the Prime Minister, Theresa May.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Boris Johnson, ‘Beyond Brexit: A Global Britain’, speech at Chatham House, 2 December 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/beyond-brexit-a-global-britain>

<sup>53</sup> Boris Johnson, ‘Do Breainers really think voters will be cowed by the likes of Obama?’ *Daily Telegraph*, 25 April 2016. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/24/do-breainers-really-think-voters-will-be-cowed-by-the-likes-of/>

<sup>54</sup> Michael Gove, ‘Secure in our values?’ speech, 8 June 2016, [http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/gove\\_and\\_raab\\_eu\\_membership\\_makes\\_us\\_less\\_safe.html](http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/gove_and_raab_eu_membership_makes_us_less_safe.html)

<sup>55</sup> Michael Gove, ‘The risks of Remain: security’, 6 June 2016, [http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/voting\\_to\\_stay\\_in\\_the\\_eu\\_is\\_the\\_risky\\_option.html](http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/voting_to_stay_in_the_eu_is_the_risky_option.html)

<sup>56</sup> ‘Ukip’s Nigel Farage tells Van Rompuy: You have the charisma of a damp rag’, the Guardian 25 February 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/feb/25/nigel-farage-herman-van-rompuy-damp-rag>

<sup>57</sup> Nigel Farage, Speech in the European Parliament, 28 June 2016, <https://www.politicshome.com/news/europe/eu-policy-agenda/brexit/news/76683/full-text-nigel-farages-speech-european-parliament>

<sup>58</sup> *Hansard*, 21 October 2019, cl.736.

<sup>59</sup> *Hansard*, 10 September 2018, cl.526.



Claims about the threat posed by the EU were accompanied by grave warnings about the dangers posed by its rules on freedom of movement, including repeated assertions that ‘uncontrolled’ immigration from the EU would place an intolerable strain on Britain’s public services. Boris Johnson maintained that: ‘More and more people will exercise their unfettered rights to come to this country, putting more pressure on our public services’.<sup>60</sup> The Labour MP, and Chair of Vote Leave, Gisela Stuart, warned of: ‘Growing Brussels control over our borders. Mass migration speeding up. Pressure heaped on public services’.<sup>61</sup> 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’.<sup>62</sup> Liam Fox, shortly before his appointment as Secretary of State for International Trade, said that remaining in the EU would mean being ‘forced to accept unlimited free movement of people ... The inevitable result will be worsening overcrowding in our land limited country’.<sup>63</sup>

The framing of the EU as a contemporary folk-devil posing an existential threat to the UK overlapped with a quasi-religious emphasis on a life and death struggle against a common enemy and created a useful rallying cry for mobilising support against the external ‘other’. But these claims about the threat posed by unfettered immigration also contained more pointed religious undertones. In this case Leave campaigners gave particular prominence to (wholly inaccurate) claims about an impending accession to the EU by Turkey, whose Islamic identity is often said to be incompatible with ‘European’ (i.e. ‘Christian’) values.<sup>64</sup> The orientalist nature of this frame was vividly demonstrated in advertisements promoted by Vote Leave, one

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<sup>60</sup> Johnson, ‘Do Breainers really think voters will be cowed ...’

<sup>61</sup> Gisela Stuart, ‘The risks of Remain: immigration’, 6 June 2016,

[http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/voting\\_to\\_stay\\_in\\_the\\_eu\\_is\\_the\\_risky\\_option.html](http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/voting_to_stay_in_the_eu_is_the_risky_option.html)

<sup>62</sup> James Tapsfield, ‘Gove warns of migration “free-for-all” if Britain votes to stay in the EU’, Mail Online, 25 April 2016, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3556924/Gove-warns-migration-free-Britain-votes-stay-EU-expansion-hand-millions-five-nations-including-Turkey-right-freely-UK.html>

<sup>63</sup> Liam Fox, ‘Memories of green? The cost of uncontrolled migration’, speech, 2 June, 2016,

[http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/rt\\_hon\\_liam\\_fox\\_mp\\_memories\\_of\\_green\\_the\\_cost\\_of\\_uncontrolled\\_migration.html](http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/rt_hon_liam_fox_mp_memories_of_green_the_cost_of_uncontrolled_migration.html)

<sup>64</sup> Bahar Rumelili, ‘Negotiating Europe: EU-Turkey relations from an identity perspective’, *Insight Turkey* 10:1 (2008): pp.97-110.

of which included a map of Europe with two large arrows leading from Turkey (highlighted in red) to the UK, accompanied by the text: ‘Britain’s new border is with Syria and Iraq’. The clear implication was that the accession of Turkey would provide an open door to immigration from the Middle East. More notoriously still, a poster displayed by Leave.EU left no doubts about the racialised and religiously othered nature of this discourse, showing an image of desperate refugees fleeing the civil war in Syria (another Muslim majority country) with the strapline: ‘We must break free of the EU and take control of our borders’.

### **Brexit as national rebirth**

The second core frame used by Leave campaigners was a claim that Brexit would provide a source of national rebirth and salvation. This frame, steeped in long-running myths of British exceptionalism, was based on the assertion that the EU project was incompatible with the fundamental characteristics of the British people, whose outlook and rightful place in the world was uniquely ‘global’. As such, Brexit was presented as a golden opportunity to liberate the British people from the constraints of the EU and enable them to fulfil their historical destiny as global leaders and international free traders. This sense of national identity – of an island people, geopolitically and culturally distinct from continental Europe, who had spawned a vast Empire through their buccaneering spirit – also had more direct religious underpinnings. Britain’s Protestant heritage and its historical antipathy towards Roman Catholicism has yielded an enduring historical narrative of Britain’s identity as the sacred home of an elect, whose destiny it was to defend and promote reformed Christianity via a process of imperial expansion.<sup>65</sup> The influential role of Protestantism in creating a sense of national purpose and cohesion has been noted by a number of scholars. Talal Asad for example, writes that the

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<sup>65</sup> Jonathan Clark, ‘Protestantism, nationalism, and national identity, 1660-1832’, *The Historical Journal*, 43:1 (2000): pp.249-276; also see Sabina Mihelj, “‘Faith in nation comes in different guises’: Modernist versions of religious nationalism’, *Nations and Nationalism* 13:2 (2007): pp.265-284..

established church was the ‘necessary condition’ for the construction of the English nation.<sup>66</sup> Barbara-Ann Rieffer adds that, by the eighteenth century, ‘Protestantism was the dominant component of British life and the foundation on which the state was explicitly based’.<sup>67</sup> And as Linda Colley observes, the experience of imperialism ‘encouraged the British to see themselves as a distinct, special, and often superior people’.<sup>68</sup>

This religious dimension to Britain’s sense of national identity was translated politically into strong support for ideas of national sovereignty (as a bulwark against any potential Catholic incursions) and, more latterly, to suspicions of the European project (considered to be a Catholic enterprise) that were reflected in voting patterns in the Brexit referendum. Research shows that Euroscepticism was more pronounced among Church of England voters than other religious denominations (with Catholics and those professing to have ‘no religion’ being most supportive of Remain) with a clear majority of Anglicans voting to Leave. Their main concerns centred on issues of immigration and ideas about an erosion of British democracy and national values. Greg Smith and Linda Woodhead have described this as the defence of ‘a cultural and ethnic identity against perceived threats’,<sup>69</sup> while Siobhan McAndrew has claimed that the ‘Anglican effect’ in the EU referendum (an effect that was mediated by authoritarian values and anti-immigration attitudes) suggests that there was a distinct ‘Christian nationalist aspect to Leave support’.<sup>70</sup>

The sense of Brexit as a means towards liberating the British people and enabling them to fulfil their unique historic purpose was encapsulated in the slogan: ‘Take Back Control’. To Boris Johnson, the EU project was at odds with ‘our particular traditions of independent

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<sup>66</sup> Talal Asad, ‘Religion, Nation-State, Secularism’, in Peter van der Veer and Hartmut Lehmann (eds), *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia*, (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2021), p.184.

<sup>67</sup> Barbara-Ann J. Rieffer, ‘Religion and nationalism’, p.227.

<sup>68</sup> Linda Colley, ‘Britishness and otherness: An argument’, *Journal of British Studies*, 31:4 (1992): pp.309-329, cit.p. 324.

<sup>69</sup> Smith and Woodhead, ‘Religion and Brexit’, p.218; also see Kolpinskaya and Fox, ‘Playing on Brexit?’

<sup>70</sup> Siobhan McAndrew, ‘Belonging, believing, behaving, and Brexit: Channels of religiosity and religious identity in support for leaving the European Union’, *British Journal of Sociology* 71:5 (2020): pp.867–897.

parliamentary and legal systems that go back centuries’, and, as such, Brexit was about ‘re-engaging this country with its global identity ... in keeping with Britain's deepest instincts and history’.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Dominic Raab (who became Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union in 2018) claimed that ‘[t]here is no European country more global in outlook than Britain’,<sup>72</sup> while his colleague Mark Francois maintained that being a global free trading nation was ‘historically in our national DNA’ (a metaphor helping to naturalise the idea of leaving the EU and to present it as an inevitable occurrence)<sup>73</sup> and described Brexit as a vital step for enabling the British people to ‘take back full control of our national destiny’.<sup>74</sup> David Davis (the first Secretary of State for Leaving the European Union) claimed that the history of Europe was ‘not our history’, adding that: ‘The European Project is not right for us. The Global Project is’.<sup>75</sup> Brexit, he said, would provide the catalyst ‘for Britain to take control of its own destiny’.<sup>76</sup> And as the Conservative MP and prominent Brexit campaigner, Andrew Bridgen, wrote, shortly before the UK’s exit from the EU: ‘The moment of destiny is almost here ... Britain will once again take its place on the global stage as an independent nation ... freed from the shackles of the EU’s bureaucratic regulation, Britain will flourish, exploiting our advantages of a flexible labour market, a world lead in innovation ... the gift of the English language and our cultural power’.<sup>77</sup>

Leave campaigners also claimed that the positive effects of Britain’s liberation would be felt around the world. Thus, assertions of national salvation were accompanied by the claim that, by freeing-up Britain to promote greater free market capitalism, Brexit would also help to

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<sup>71</sup> Boris Johnson, ‘Boris Johnson’s Brexit speech’, the *Spectator*, 14 February 2018.

<sup>72</sup> Dominic Raab, ‘The advantages of controlled immigration’, speech for Vote Leave, 8 June 2016, [http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/gove\\_and\\_raab\\_eu\\_membership\\_makes\\_us\\_less\\_safe.html](http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/gove_and_raab_eu_membership_makes_us_less_safe.html)

<sup>73</sup> We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this point.

<sup>74</sup> *Hansard*, 29 March 2017, cl.285.

<sup>75</sup> David Davis, ‘Speech on Brexit’, 4 February 2016, <http://www.ukpol.co.uk/david-davis-2016-speech-on-brexit/>

<sup>76</sup> *Hansard*, 10 October 2016, cl.40.

<sup>77</sup> Andrew Bridgen, ‘I see no traps ... that’s why I’ll seize our day of destiny’, Mail Online, 30 December 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-9097169/I-no-traps-thats-ill-seize-day-destiny-writes-ANDREW-BRIDGEN.html>

reduce poverty abroad. Echoing his commitment to neo-liberalism, Boris Johnson insisted that free markets had taken ‘billions of people out of poverty in the last 40 years’ and added that it was the UK’s ‘historic post-Brexit function ... to be the leading agitators for free trade’.<sup>78</sup> Likewise, Liam Fox (then-Secretary of State for International Trade) claimed that ‘global Britain’ would ‘give the world’s poorest the ability to trade their way out of poverty’,<sup>79</sup> and Dominic Raab declared that free trade would directly benefit ‘the poorest African nations, currently languishing under the yolk of hypocritical western protectionism and for whom free trade is the surest route to real independence’.<sup>80</sup> Thus, Britain’s own salvation would bring salvation to other parts of the globe.

This type of exceptionalist discourse also contained a strong anti-intellectual current. Voters were urged to follow their emotions and to put their faith in the idea that Brexit would lead to a new golden age (or, in Boris Johnson’s terms, the ‘sunlit meadows beyond’).<sup>81</sup> This was manifest in the vilification of experts in fields such as economics, law, and international trade, the large majority of whom predicted that leaving the EU would create multiple problems, and in an insistence that Brexit would instead bring many economic and political benefits. Any difficulties were to be overcome with confidence and resolute self-belief. Boris Johnson, for example, warned people to ignore ‘the prophets of doom’,<sup>82</sup> and described the vote to Leave the EU as ‘a heroic act of national self-belief’ in which the voters had shown that they had ‘the guts to believe in Britain’.<sup>83</sup> Adding that, ‘with a bit of gumption and a bit of positive energy,

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<sup>78</sup> Johnson, ‘The risks of Remain’.

<sup>79</sup> Liam Fox, ‘The Trade Dividend’, speech at Mansion House, 17 October 2018.  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-trade-dividend>

<sup>80</sup> *Hansard*, 31 January 2017, cl.941.

<sup>81</sup> Boris Johnson, ‘Speech on the EU referendum’, May 6 2016.  
<https://www.conservativehome.com/parliament/2016/05/boris-johnsons-speech-on-the-eu-referendum-full-text.html>

<sup>82</sup> Boris Johnson, ‘My vision for a bold, thriving Britain enabled by Brexit’, *Daily Telegraph*, 16 September 2017.

<sup>83</sup> Boris, ‘The people want us to deliver a full British Brexit and we MUST bust out of the corsets of EU regulation’, *The Sun*, 22 June 2018.

there is no limit to what we can achieve’,<sup>84</sup> Johnson claimed that ‘whatever the bureaucratic, technical or logistical difficulties there may be ... they can be overcome with a spirit of optimism and determination’.<sup>85</sup> Other Leave campaigners echoed this call to faith. Gisela Stuart claimed that a vote to leave the EU would be like ‘jumping from darkness into light’.<sup>86</sup> Michael Gove, insisting that ‘the people of this country have had enough of experts’,<sup>87</sup> described the referendum result as ‘an assertion of belief in Britain’.<sup>88</sup> Liam Fox declared that: ‘We are not passengers in our own destiny ... we must be bold, optimistic, and confident – in ourselves, our people and our values’.<sup>89</sup> Theresa May, claiming that Britain was now facing one of the ‘great turning points in our national story’, urged the British people to ‘look forward with optimism and hope and believe in the enduring power of the British spirit’.<sup>90</sup>

### **The sacred ‘Will of the People’**

This sense of British exceptionalism was also evident in the aftermath of the referendum. With Leave campaigners having failed to spell out exactly what Brexit entailed, the vote was followed by a developing war of position as rival factions in the Leave camp sought to promote their own interpretation of Brexit as the one that had been endorsed by the 17.4 million Leave voters. In this struggle to construct the meaning of ‘Brexit’, each side sought to legitimise their position with reference to ‘the Will of the People’. One of the core goals of these competing frames was to homogenise the wishes of the Leave voters into the unequivocal resolve of the

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<sup>84</sup> *Hansard*, 11 July 2017, cl.138.

<sup>85</sup> *Hansard*, 14 January 2019, cl.905.

<sup>86</sup> Gisela Stuart, ‘Speech at Vote Leave HQ’, April 13 2016, [http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/gisela\\_stuart\\_exposes\\_the\\_risks\\_of\\_staying\\_in\\_the\\_eu.html](http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/gisela_stuart_exposes_the_risks_of_staying_in_the_eu.html); On the metaphor of ‘the light’ in religious discourse, see Rachel L. Kirkwood, ‘“Stand still in the light”: What conceptual metaphor research can tell us about Quaker theology’, *Religions* 10:1 (2019): pp. 41-51.

<sup>87</sup> Henry Mance, ‘Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove’, *Financial Times*, 3 June 2016. <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>

<sup>88</sup> Michael Gove, ‘A new national consensus? Building a union which endures’, 21 May 2018, <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/A-New-National-Consensus.pdf>

<sup>89</sup> Liam Fox, ‘Brexit and beyond: Britain’s place in the world in the 2020s’, speech, 30 April 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/brexit-and-beyond-britains-place-in-the-world-in-the-2020s>

<sup>90</sup> *Hansard*, 29 March 2017, cl.251.

British people as a whole. Despite the fact that people voted Leave for a multitude of reasons,<sup>91</sup> and although in legal terms the referendum was an advisory and non-binding affair, this post-referendum struggle to create a mythologised historiography of Brexit resulted in the Leave vote being elevated to the status of a sacred power, a sacrosanct, inviolable, and unalterable expression of popular sovereignty. The result was that this sacralised ‘Will’ was to be placed beyond any form of critical scrutiny, whether by MPs, as the legitimate representatives of ‘the People’, or the people themselves in the form of a second confirmatory referendum.

At the heart of this framing was a Manichean dynamic presenting all those who did not subscribe to Brexit as a whole, or even to the particular construction of Brexit set out by the dominant Leave faction, as traitors keen to betray the Brexit cause. In one of the most high-profile examples of this frame, one of the UK’s most popular newspapers, the *Daily Mail*, attacked a number of High Court judges as ‘Enemies of the People’ for ruling that the formal process of leaving the EU would require a vote in Parliament.<sup>92</sup> Such accusations of heresy became a prominent feature of the discourse used by leading Brexiteers. Uses of the phrase ‘Will of the People’ (or its variant, ‘Will of the British people’) leapt dramatically in the wake of the referendum, with references in the House of Commons rising from 66 in the two years preceding the vote to 369 in the two years after it. David Davis, addressing the House in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, maintained that ‘Crown prerogative rests on the will of the people’, and insisted: ‘There is no exercise of Crown prerogative in history that is better underpinned by the will of the people than this particular exercise’.<sup>93</sup> In a similar fashion, Dominic Raab asserted during the Parliamentary debate on triggering Article 50 (the formal notification of Britain’s intention to withdraw from the EU) that ‘it is the responsibility of every democrat in both Houses to give effect to the will of the British people by passing the Bill

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<sup>91</sup> See Steven Kettell and Peter Kerr, ‘From eating cake to crashing out: constructing the myth of a no deal Brexit’, *Comparative European Politics* 18:4 (2019): pp.590-608.

<sup>92</sup> *Daily Mail*, 3 November 2016.

<sup>93</sup> *Hansard*, 10 October 2016, cl.47.

without delay’.<sup>94</sup> Jacob Rees-Mogg, denouncing opponents of Brexit for trying ‘to obstruct the will of the British people’, argued that triggering Article 50 would ‘implement the noble, brave and glorious decision that the people made on that day of legend and song, the twenty-third of June in the year of our Lord 2016’.<sup>95</sup>

Similar rhetoric was evident in the Parliamentary conflicts over Theresa May’s Withdrawal Agreement. This deal, to enact Britain’s exit from the European Union, was regarded as anathema by many Brexit supporters for its inclusion of a Northern Irish ‘backstop’ – a regulatory framework that, they argued, would lock the UK into the confines of the EU indefinitely. Liam Fox described the deal as ‘a betrayal of the voters in the referendum’,<sup>96</sup> while Priti Patel, shortly before her appointment as Home Secretary, told the House of Commons that the backstop would ‘deny the British people and our Parliament the sovereign right to choose our future and be in control of our destiny’.<sup>97</sup> Boris Johnson said that the Withdrawal Agreement was ‘a betrayal of millions of people who voted leave’<sup>98</sup> and used his regular column in the *Daily Telegraph* to claim that Britain was being humiliated by the EU. Presenting himself as a Biblical saviour of the nation, Johnson declared that: ‘It is time for the PM to channel the spirit of Moses in Exodus, and say to Pharaoh in Brussels – LET MY PEOPLE GO’.<sup>99</sup> Conversely, supporters of the Agreement also tried to claim a mandate from the 17.4 million Leave voters to legitimise their position. Stephen Barclay (the-then Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union) argued that the deal was ‘the best way for the House to deliver on the will of the people’,<sup>100</sup> and Theresa May insisted that the Agreement kept ‘faith with the

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<sup>94</sup> *Hansard*, 24 January 2017, cl.178.

<sup>95</sup> *Hansard*, 31 January 2017, cl.909.

<sup>96</sup> Liam Fox, ‘Britain’s trading future’, Speech delivered at Bloomberg, London, 27 February 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/britains-trading-future>

<sup>97</sup> *Hansard*, 29 March 2019, cl.739.

<sup>98</sup> *Hansard*, 15 October 2018, cl.415.

<sup>99</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, 25 March 2019.

<sup>100</sup> *Hansard*, 20 March 2019, cl.110.



British people’<sup>101</sup> arguing that the government needed to implement the deal in order to ‘deliver on their vote’.<sup>102</sup>

The ‘Will of the People’ mantra was additionally used to attack supporters of a second referendum as well as those MPs who were calling for an extension of Article 50 in order to avoid the economic disruption that leaving the EU without a trade deal would cause. Boris Johnson claimed that MPs trying to extend the provisions of Article 50 were seeking ‘to frustrate the will of the people and to overturn and cancel the result of the referendum’.<sup>103</sup> Mark Francois, in response to MPs who voted for an extension to Article 50, quoted Jesus directly, saying: ‘Forgive them Father – for they know not what they do!’<sup>104</sup> Andrea Leadsom, the Leader of the House of Commons, warned that supporters of a confirmatory referendum (a so-called ‘People’s Vote’) were attempting ‘to subvert the will of the people as expressed in the referendum’<sup>105</sup> and Priti Patel insisted that a second referendum ‘would seek to deny the British people the rights and freedoms that they voted for back in 2016’.<sup>106</sup> In the same vein, Michael Gove said that holding a second referendum would show voters ‘that we did not have faith in their judgment and in our democracy’<sup>107</sup> and accused supporters of a second vote of trying to break the ‘sacred promises’ that MPs had made.<sup>108</sup>

## Conclusion

This analysis makes a direct contribution to the growing body of work on the relationship between populism and religion by showing how religious themes can be used to underpin

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<sup>101</sup> Theresa May, Speech to Conservative Party Conference, 3 October 2018, <https://www.politicshome.com/news/uk/political-parties/conservative-party/news/98760/read-full-theresa-mays-speech-2018>

<sup>102</sup> *Hansard*, 9 July 2018, cl.730.

<sup>103</sup> *Hansard*, 3 September 2019, cl.40.

<sup>104</sup> *Hansard*, 3 April 2019, cl.1217.

<sup>105</sup> *Hansard*, 8 April 2019, cl.83.

<sup>106</sup> *Hansard*, 27 February 2019, cls.427-8.

<sup>107</sup> *Hansard*, 10 January 2019, cl.582.

<sup>108</sup> *Hansard*, 19 October 2019, cl.645.

populist discourse in a comparatively secularised context. In doing so, we have drawn on insights from neo-Durkheimian theory about the enduring role of the sacred in social and political life to highlight the ways in which quasi-religious themes played a prominent role in the discourse that was used to promote the idea of Brexit. The three core frames highlighted by our analysis each show an ‘elective affinity’ between populism and religion.

The first of these presented the EU as a classic populist ‘folk-devil’, responsible for a multitude of domestic problems and built on the political myth that Britain’s long-term economic and political decline could be linked directly to its decision to join the European Economic Community. This provided the anchor point for the Brexit discourse as a whole, grounding it in the idea that the EU’s surreptitious drive towards political union posed an existential threat to Britain’s democracy, its economy, and – given the rules around freedom of movement and unfettered immigration – its culture and general way of life. The second core frame drew on notions of British exceptionalism and religiously infused ideas of national identity to present Brexit as an opportunity to liberate the ‘British people’ and allow them to fulfil their manifest global destiny; a destiny which would bring salvation, not just for the UK, but for other parts of the globe. The third core frame emerged from a post-referendum struggle to establish an orthodoxy around the meaning of ‘Brexit’. This saw a number of competing political factions struggling to impose their interpretation of Brexit, with each side drawing on sacralised notions of ‘the Will of the People’ in order to legitimate their position and push their interpretation of Brexit beyond any formal opposition or scrutiny.

Our analysis also seeks to contribute to the wider literature on the links between religion and politics. By highlighting the use of religious themes in a secularised context our study lends support to the neo-Durkheimian view that the principal categories for structuring modern forms of social organisation (such as ‘sovereignty’, ‘the nation’, and ‘the people’) continue to bear the stamp of their theological origins. From this perspective, the thematic links between

populism and religion are more than a case of mere superficial resemblances. This is not to say that populism is itself a form of religion, but the enduring salience of a religious repertoire in populist discourse is an expression of the fact that a complex social order requires a reference point that appears to lie outside or beyond itself to ground an enduring and stable sense of legitimacy. More mundanely, populists can only deploy religious themes for political ends if those themes resonate with their intended audience, and the fact that they can do so in a secularised context (at least in the case examined here) suggests that this form of quasi-religious political mobilisation has a more fundamental appeal.

A number of potential criticisms could be made of our analysis. The first is that focusing on the links between populism and religion has limited explanatory power given that religious themes have been found in a variety of political formations, including civil religion, political religion, and certain varieties of nationalism. It might be said that politicians of various stripes and persuasions have shown a proclivity for using religious tropes to the extent that they have now become part of the generic political landscape, with nothing specifically ‘religious’ about them. One response to this is that, in many ways, such an objection serves to support the point at hand. If neo-Durkheimian theory is defensible, then it is precisely the religious (or, more accurately, sacred) character of these reference points that allow them to play a potentially requisite role in legitimising a complex social order and maintaining a sense of cohesion. From this perspective, the use of religious themes in political discourse and the political myths that are constructed around them could be seen as playing a key role in maintaining social order. Without this sacralisation of political discourse, the peaceful endurance of a political community may become more precarious.

A second potential criticism is that, while Britain may be advancing significantly along the path of secularisation, the case of Brexit does not offer a clear example of populism in a non-religious context given the enduring influence of religion (particularly Christianity) on British

politics and culture. Thus it could be claimed that what is being detected here is not the underlying thematic persistence of a basic religious modality, but the enduring influence of Anglicanism. Indeed, the point has been made that the social and cultural influence of a particular religious form can persist even after its visible expressions of social support (such as membership and attendance at a place of worship) have declined to a point where secularisation may be said to have taken place.<sup>109</sup> This point has some merit, especially given the enduring influence of Protestant ideas in conceptions of British national identity, and it is certainly a matter for debate as to how ‘non religious’ a country needs to be before it is classed as ‘secularised’. But this raises both an empirical and a conceptual dilemma. Given the complex and deeply interwoven nature of political and religious forces, and given that all human societies have, at some point, been religiously ordered, it may simply be impossible to fully disentangle the complex relationships of cause and effect at work here. Further research to examine the use of populist discourse in other secularised contexts, and comparative studies into the use of religious themes by political actors in both secularised and religiously structured settings, would help to extend our understanding of these dynamics.

A third potential criticism is that our focus on the discourse promoted by Leave campaigners overlooks the rhetorical frameworks used by the campaign for Remain, thereby presenting a one-sided impression of the overall Brexit debate. Indeed, it can be argued that Remain campaigners also drew on religious themes to mobilise support for their cause.<sup>110</sup> Remain campaigners often displayed overt attachment to the symbols and regalia of the European Union, exhibiting a sense of European identity bound up in the use of the EU flag, its anthem, and a commitment to its ideals, in a way that might be said to resemble the type of nationalist politics that are often seen as a form of religious surrogacy. In this case, however, a direct

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<sup>109</sup> For example see Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>110</sup> For example, see Gawain Towler, ‘Faith and apostasy in the gospel of Brexit’, *The Critic*, 2 March 2021. <https://thecritic.co.uk/faith-and-apostasy-in-the-gospel-of-brexit/>

comparison between these two sides would be a false equivalence. While supporters of Leave made clear use of religious themes, as we have highlighted throughout, the discourse used by the Remain campaign centred overwhelmingly on technocratic, economic concerns, principally highlighting the material risks of leaving the European Union. Indeed, the lack of emotional heft in the campaign for Remain is widely noted to be one of the core reasons behind its failure to mobilise the same levels of support as those that were calling on Britain to Leave.<sup>111</sup>

Understanding the growing popularity of populist politics necessitates an exploration of the ways in which populist political actors mobilise voters. This study has shown that, in the case of Brexit, the discourse of the Leave campaign drew on a number of religious themes to present Brexit as an historic moment of destiny for the British people, and in doing so, provides evidence that populists are able to deploy such themes in a comparatively secularised national context. We hope that this finding can contribute to our wider understanding of the links between politics and religion by giving weight to neo-Durkheimian theory about the enduring role of the sacred in social and political affairs.

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<sup>111</sup> Jonathan Moss, Emily Robinson, and Jake Watts, 'Brexit and the everyday politics of emotion: methodological lessons from history', *Political Studies* 68:4 (2020): pp.837-856.