CHAPTER 1

Introduction
The New Crusaders

In front of Dresden's baroque Frauenkirche, a large crowd had gathered. Many were carrying oversized crosses, others candles. A few hundred kilometres to the west, in Paris, thousands of people rallied in veneration of a Catholic saint. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, several thousand activists gathered in the centre of the nation's capital in support of a leader who had made headlines by posing with the Bible in front of a prominent church in the city. They too, were carrying crosses, waving 'Jesus saves' flags and blaring Christian music from their speakers.

What is remarkable about these events is that none of them occurred during religious services, processions or any other form of religious gathering. Nor were any of the speakers or leaders in question clergy or representatives of a church. Instead, each event was instigated by a right-wing populist movement: the first was a demonstration by Germany's anti-immigrant 'Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident' movement (PEGIDA), the second, an annual march of the French far-right Rassemblement National party (RN, formerly the Front National, FN) to honour France's national saint Joan of Arc, and the third were scenes from the pro-Trump protests, which ended in the deadly storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021. Donald Trump was also the leader who had held up a Bible in front of the cameras at St John's Church in Washington, DC in the summer of 2020.[1] But he did so only after instructing the National Guard to use tear gas and rubber bullets to forcibly clear a path through peaceful protesters who had gathered between the White House and the church to protest against racism and white nationalism after the killing of George Floyd, an unarmed black man, by a white police officer.[2]

[1] Appenzeller 2015; Albertini 2015; Green 2021.
[2] Bennett et al. 2020.

Although these events took place hundreds and thousands of miles apart, in different nations and for varied causes, they are all emblematic of two monumental developments in contemporary Western democracies. First, the astonishing rise of right-wing populism, a political movement that prioritises national identity and culture and that claims that the 'pure and homogenous' people are threatened by a neglectful, contemptuous and corrupt liberal elite on the one hand, and by the mass immigration of culturally different, external 'others' on the other.[3] Having steadily grown in importance across many Western countries for decades, right-wing populist parties and movements firmly established themselves at the centre of the public imagination in the mid-2010s through the successful Brexit Referendum in the UK, the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency and the rise of the RN and the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, Alternative for Germany) as the largest opposition parties in France and Germany at the time.[4] What unifies right-wing populist movements across Germany, France and the United States – alongside parties like Geert Wilders' Freedom Party in the Netherlands, Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) – is not their positions on traditional left–right divides such as taxation, abortion, free trade, gay marriage or church–state relations (questions on which these movements, in fact, often diverge), but that they all prioritise national culture and group identities over universalist multiculturalism and individualism and that they all claim to defend the 'group rights' of the majority through their own brand of right-wing identity politics.[5]

As the episodes in Dresden, Paris and Washington DC suggest, references to religion in general, and to Christianity in particular, feature prominently in this new brand of right-wing identity politics, leading us to a second major trend in the West: the dramatic resurgence of religious rhetoric and symbolism in the political arena. From Washington to Warsaw and from Reykjavik to Rome, far-right politicians are evoking their countries' Christian identity, displaying Christian symbols, debating the role of religion in public and presenting themselves as defenders of the Christian West. This is remarkable since most of these countries were previously perceived as secularised, or at least on the path towards further secularisation.[6]

[3] Roy, McDonnell and Marzouki 2016; Mudde 2017; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018.
[4] Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Kaufmann 2018; Roy, McDonnell and Marzouki 2016; Mudde 2017.
[5] Like the identity politics of the left, this identity politics of the radical right emphasises racial, ethnocultural and sexual identity as drivers of political action over ideological, confessional or class divides. However, unlike left-wing identity politics, it does not claim to defend the group rights and identities of minorities but rather those of the ethnic majority, which often includes claims to cultural hegemony within the national community. Jardina 2019.
[6] Roy, McDonnell and Marzouki 2016; Elcott et al. 2021.

This book offers a fresh perspective on the complex links between religion, populism and the rise of right-wing identity politics on both sides of the Atlantic. Based on the analysis of survey data and of exclusive in-depth interviews with 114 populist leaders, key policymakers and faith leaders in the United States, Germany and France, it draws a picture showing a rise of right-wing populism and references to religion in the West less driven by a resurgence of conservative religiosity than by the emergence of a new social cleavage centred on secular identity politics. In this context, right-wing populists are using Christian symbols and language as insignia of a culturalised 'Christianism' – a symbol of whiteness and Western civilisation directed against Islam and immigration that is interchangeable with Viking-veneer, neo-pagan symbols and even secularism, but often increasingly dissociated from Christian beliefs, values and institutions.

With these insights, this book challenges widespread assumptions and narratives about how right-wing populism and Christianity relate to one another. Various scholars, politicians and commentators have previously suggested that the rise of the populist right and their use of Christian symbols are emblematic of a resurgence of religious fervour across the West, and of religiously inspired 'cultural backlashes' against the liberalisation of cultural norms and the influx of new waves of (Muslim) immigration.[7] In the United States for instance, many observers took Trump's and his supporters' religious-laden rhetoric at face value and interpreted Trumpism as a continuation of the old religious culture wars driven by Christian nationalism and the Christian right.[8] Meanwhile, in Europe, commentators have warned of the Americanisation of European politics through the expansion of an identitarian Christian right that opposes globalisation, liberal values and immigration.[9]

Yet, as straightforward as such interpretations may seem in the light of right-wing populists parading oversized crosses, holding up Bibles and posing as the saviours of the Christian West, several indicators complicate this picture. For instance, although in the United States over 80 per cent of white Evangelicals voted for Donald Trump both in 2016 and 2020, surveys revealed that during the 2016 Republican primaries, Trump initially did best among those GOP voters who never attend church, whereas he underperformed amongst the most frequent

[7] Norris and Inglehart 2019.
[8] Jones 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Whitehead and Perry 2020.
[9] Becher 2016; Bednarz 2018; Du Cleuziou 2018; Fourquet 2018a; Weiss 2017; Brockschmidt 2021.

churchgoers.[10] Meanwhile, although white Christian nationalist attitudes have been rightly identified as a key driver for Trump's success, the studies that did so also revealed that religious *practice* often correlates with *greater* openness towards immigrants, *more positive* attitudes towards racial minorities and *higher* levels of tolerance towards religious minorities.[11] Moreover, the public focus on Trump's faith advisory board of loyal Evangelical leaders has often overshadowed the fact that many prominent American faith leaders have loudly criticised the former president's use of religious symbols.[12] For example, after Trump's photo stunt at St John's Church, Mariann Budde, the bishop who oversees the church, decried the fact that Trump 'used our symbols and our sacred space as a way to reinforce a message that is antithetical to everything that the person of Jesus and the Gospel texts represent'.[13] The Catholic Archbishop of Washington DC called a similar visit by Trump to the shrine of Pope John Paul II 'baffling' and 'reprehensible', emphasising that the then president 'egregiously misused and manipulated [the shrine] in a fashion that violates our religious principles'.[14] Even staunch leaders of the Christian right such as Pat Robertson publicly lamented Trump's behaviours, saying 'You just don't do that, Mr President. It isn't cool!'[15]

In Europe, the situation is more ambiguous still. Despite the ostentatious use of religious symbols by Western European right-wing populist movements, their supporters are often shown to be disproportionately irreligious. Surveys among the cross-carrying PEGIDA demonstrators in Dresden revealed, for example, that three-quarters of participants self-identified as atheist or irreligious (compared with about a third of Germany's overall population at the time).[16] Scholars have found that in this they were representative of far-right supporters in many Western European countries, where church attendance turns out to be a powerful empirical predictor for *not* voting for a right-wing populist party, causing some to speak of a 'religious vaccination effect' or 'religious immunity' against the populist right.[17] Meanwhile, European church leaders and institutions, including

[10] Carney 2019; Pew 2016b; Smith and Martinez 2016.
[11] Whitehead and Perry 2020, 143.
[12] Alexander 2016; Crouch 2016; Galli 2019; Moore 2015.
[13] Chappell 2020.
[14] Gregory 2020.
[15] Teague 2020.
[16] Appenzeller 2015.
[17] Arzheimer 2009; Dargent 2016; Immerzeel, Jaspers and Lubbers 2013; Lubbers and Scheepers 2001; Perrineau 2014; Siegers and Jedinger 2021; Cremer 2021a.

Pope Francis, most national Catholic Bishop Conferences and the leadership of most of Europe's Protestant churches, have been united in their public condemnation of right-wing populist movements, with some going as far as the former president of the Lutheran World Federation Bishop, Christian Krause, who called their use of religious symbols 'perverted'.[18]

Such paradoxical expressions of the relationship between right-wing populism, identity politics and Christianity in Western societies raise fundamental questions: What are the social and demographic roots behind the rise of right populist movements and their new brand of identity politics in Western democracies? How and why does religion feature in right-wing populist rhetoric and strategies? How do Christian communities react to national populists' religious-laden rhetoric? And what is the role of mainstream parties and religious leaders in shaping the relationship between religion and right-wing populism?

By addressing these questions, this book sets out to unravel the origins behind a social and political phenomenon that is reshaping the very fabric of Western democracies. It does so based on an in-depth analysis of the contemporary relationship between right-wing populism, religion and identity politics in three major Western democracies: Germany, France and the United States. All three countries have experienced the rise of powerful national populist movements throughout the 2010s, and a resurgence of religious references by these movements. Yet, the way in which the relationship between religion and national populism has played out in each country has differed profoundly. Whereas in America, white Christians – Evangelicals in particular, but also Catholics and Mainline Protestants – have emerged as some of Donald Trump's most loyal supporters,[19] their French and German brethren have proven themselves comparatively 'immune' to right-wing populists' appeals, often voting for these parties at much lower rates than their secular compatriots.[20] Similarly, church leaders and prominent Christian politicians have reacted very differently to the far right's co-optation of religious symbols, ranging from consistent and outspoken condemnation of the far right in Germany, to quieter opposition in France and to an amalgamation of more muted criticism, ambiguous silence and outright support in the United States.

[18] Die Welt 2015.
[19] Schwadel and Smith 2019; Smith and Martinez 2016.
[20] Dargent 2016; Immerzeel, Jaspers and Lubbers 2013; Siegers and Jedinger 2021; Cremer 2021a; Montgomery and Winter 2015.

To understand these diverging dynamics between right-wing populist movements and Christian communities' reactions, this volume explores how the historical relationship between church and state has shaped the role of religion in politics in each country. It investigates the socio-demographic origins behind the rise of national populist politics and puts their references to Christianity under greater scrutiny. It examines the responses of Christian voters, mainstream politicians and church leaders in each country and addresses the question of what role faith can still play in the politics of increasingly multicultural and fragmented democracies. This book thereby distinguishes between 'demand-side variables', such as socio-demographic, cultural and political shifts that determine the demand for national populist politics among the electorate, and political and religious 'supply-side factors', such as the structure of church–state relations, a country's voting system or the behaviour of political and religious elites and institutions, which enable national populists to harness this demand. To study these phenomena, it relies on new survey data, speeches, party manifestos and other documents. But most importantly it draws on the insights from the 114 exclusive in-depth elite interviews with top-level leaders of national populist movements, mainstream parties, civil society and the institutional churches in Germany, France and the United States.[21]

Based on these conversations, this book finds that rather than embracing Christianity as a faith, right-wing populists in the United States, Germany and France are politicising Christianity as a secularised identity marker to mobilise voters in the context of a new social cleavage, centred around the question of identity and around a new wave of right-wing identity politics. In this context, national populists often paint themselves as staunch defenders of the Christian West, while remaining distanced from Christian beliefs, values and institutions. In fact, national populist movements seem to have capitalised on the accelerating secularisation of the white working class, by openly combining ethnocultural references to Christian heritage and symbols (rather than Christian beliefs) with secular policy stances on issues like immigration, church–state relations and religious freedom. These developments suggest a significant political shift in Western societies, where the old faith-driven religious right is gradually being replaced by a new identitarian and populist right that is much more secular in nature and may – through its culturalised uses of

[21] For a complete list of individuals interviewed for this book see Appendix A.

Christian symbols – be not just a symptom but also a harbinger of secularisation. This is not to say that Christian conservatives and Christian nationalists have disappeared from the scene, nor that religious fundamentalists may not still pose formidable threats to liberal democracy. In fact, this book shows that there is nothing in principle to prevent the old religious right from entering an alliance with the new secular identitarian right. However, what this book has found is a transformative shift in the balance of power in Western right-wing movements. Rather than being dominated by religiously defined culture wars, the new right is increasingly driven by a more secular but no less radical identitarian struggle for Western Civilisation: a godless crusade in which Christianity is turned into a secularised 'Christianism', an ethno-cultural identifier of the nation and a symbol of whiteness that is increasingly independent of Christian practice, beliefs and the institution of the church.

However, this book also shows that the battle over Christianity's role in liberal democracy is far from over. It reveals that right-wing populists' ability to successfully instrumentalise religion critically depends on factors on the political and religious supply-side, such as the institutional settlement of church–state relations, the electoral and party system, and perhaps most importantly, the actions of mainstream political party politicians and faith leaders. Christian leaders play a particularly critical role by either legitimising right-wing populist appeals to Christian identity or by erecting powerful social taboos against these movements among Christian voters. For instance, in countries such as Germany or France, where faith leaders have vehemently spoken out against right-wing populism, we can observe a powerful religious 'vaccination effect' among Christians, which prevents many of them from voting for right-wing populist parties. By contrast, in countries such as the United States, where faith leaders have largely remained silent, Christian communities appear more amenable to entering what some interviewees called 'Faustian bargains' with the post-religious populist right.

All this suggests that as the populist crusade for identity is gathering strength in the West, a new debate about the future role of religion in society has just begun, not only amongst scholars and practitioners but across political parties, churches and the public writ large. One key takeaway of this book is that far from being helpless bystanders, faith leaders and policymakers have a tremendous influence in this context. Their actions will shape whether, in our increasingly diverse and polarised democracies, religion will become a source of unity or division, of tolerance or exclusion, of faith or identity politics.

1.1 Overview

This book is divided into four parts. Part I lays out the book's intellectual, theoretical and methodological foundations as well as its overall argument. Specifically, Chapter 2 outlines in more detail the working definitions of contested concepts such as 'right-wing populism' and 'religion' used in this study and frames them within the academic literature. It briefly explains the book's demand- and supply-side framework, the sources this research is based on, the methods employed to analyse these sources, and the rationale of selecting Germany, France and the United States as the case studies for this book. Chapter 2 contains essential details about the mechanics underlying this research and is primarily written with a scholarly audience in mind.

Those who are satisfied with the briefer descriptions given above may skip straight to Chapter 3, which presents the book's overall argument in the context of the existing literature. Specifically, Chapter 3 lays out four main arguments in response to the research questions formulated above. First, that far from being the result of reignited religious culture wars, the dramatic surge of right-wing populism and white identity politics in Western democracies has been driven by the emergence of a new identity cleavage between cosmopolitans and communitarians that is rooted in the rapid advance of secularisation and the erosion of traditional sources of belonging and identity on the demand side. Second, that to capitalise on this new divide, right-wing populists employ references to Christianity in the context of a new brand of white identity politics as a secularised cultural identity marker, but often remain distanced from Christian values, beliefs and institutions. Third, that this strategy tends to be most successful amongst irreligious voters or non-practising 'cultural Christians', whereas practising Christians often remain comparatively 'immune' to right-wing populist appeals. And fourth, that the existence and strength of this 'religious vaccination effect' against the populist right critically depends on two supply-side factors: one, on the availability of a 'Christian alternative' in the political landscape and two, on churches' and faith leaders' willingness and ability to publicly denounce the populist right and create a social taboo around them. These four claims constitute the theoretical cornerstones of this book's overall argument and will serve as an underlying structure for each empirical case study.

After establishing in Part I a theoretical framework showing how right-wing populism, religion and identity politics interact in principle, Parts II–IV show empirically how these factors have shaped the landscapes of three different Western societies. Part II explores how religion and national

populism interact in Germany, focusing on the dynamics between the AfD and Germany's churches. The German case study captures the paradoxical expression of this relationship particularly well. While the AfD has been vocal in positioning itself as the defender of Germany's 'Judeo-Christian heritage',[22] the churches' reactions have been strongly negative, with many church leaders openly declaring that the AfD's platform is in direct 'contradiction to the Christian faith'.[23] Spanning Chapters 4–7, Part II begins by exploring the historical background of Germany's church-friendly institutional settlement of 'benevolent neutrality' and its implications for modern-day politics, before examining the re-politicisation of religion and the rise and transformation of the AfD in the context of a new identity cleavage. Following a close analysis of the AfD's references to religion, we find that their identitarian references to Christianity are not representative of an embrace of Christian beliefs, values and institutions but rather an attempt by a disproportionately secular party to employ Christianity as a secularised national identity marker against Islam. Part II concludes with an examination of Christian communities' reactions to the AfD's religious rhetoric, and the ways in which these reactions have been shaped by mainstream parties and religious leaders. Overall, the German case study emerges as a key example of how the existence of a credible Christian electoral alternative in the form of the CDU/CSU, as well as a powerful social taboo erected by a broad coalition of faith leaders can undermine national populists' willingness and ability to co-opt religion as an ethnonational identity marker.

Part III (Chapters 8–11) of this book moves on to the case of France. As the nation with the oldest major right-wing populist party in Europe, a well-established electoral constituency of political Catholicism, and one of the strictest models of church–state separation, the French case study provides a unique opportunity to trace the historical development of the relationship between religion and right-wing populism. To study these phenomena, Part III begins by showing how the historical antagonism between *la France Catholique* and *la Republique laïque* still shapes the relationship between politics and religion today, and how the hard-fought compromise between the two has recently been challenged by a return of political tensions surrounding religion and *laïcité*. Next, it investigates how this re-politicisation of religion may be less linked to a revival of Catholicism than to the emergence of a new identity cleavage, which

[22] AfD 2017.
[23] Bedford Strohm 2018.

is rooted in Catholicism's demise, but which has led to a new bipolarity between a liberal-cosmopolitan camp around Emmanuel Macron and populist-communitarian camp around Marine Le Pen and – more recently – Éric Zemmour. The section then examines the French far right's approach to religion and *laïcité* in particular, exploring how these two political wedge-issues and cultural identity markers can be used against Islam. Part III concludes by exploring how the resurgence of a new conservative (though initially not necessarily populist and identitarian) Catholic grassroots movement around the *Manif-pour-Tous*, and the restructuring of the French political landscape have changed the ways in which French Catholics and church officials approach the far right's ambiguous co-optation attempts of both Catholicism and *laïcité*. Overall, Part III posits that a recent narrowing of the historical 'vaccination effect' of religiosity against the RN and Zemmour in France might be less a result of the latter's embracing religion or Catholics moving towards national populist attitudes, than of a perceived lack of political alternatives and a gradual retreat of the French episcopate from political debates.

The final part of this book (Chapters 12–15) explores the relationship between right-wing populism and religion in the USA. The unexpected election of Donald Trump to the most powerful office in the world in 2016 was one of the most momentous impacts of the right-wing populist tide to date, and the fact that his election occurred in the most religious country in the West makes the USA a highly relevant case study for this book. Yet, while many commentators seek to explain the Trump phenomenon as a continuation of America's religiously laden culture wars and a victory of the religious right, Part IV explores a different possibility. It begins by discussing the historical background of the First Amendment, American civil religion, and America's culture wars in the twentieth century. It then moves on to explore how the emergence of a new identity cleavage, itself partly linked to the rapid decline of American Christianity in recent years, has shifted America's right away from the old faith-driven culture wars, towards a new more secular and race-driven white identity politics. Through a detailed exploration of this new identity cleavage, it becomes clear that Trump's national populist approach to religion has not only been at odds with America's civil religious tradition but also represents a marked radicalisation and secularisation of America's tradition of white Christian nationalism. Having established this fact, Part IV concludes by discussing the varied reactions of America's Christian communities, noting the apparent absence (or even the reversal) of the 'religious vaccination effect', as well as the choice of many Christian leaders to remain silent vis-à-vis their criticism