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ARTICLE

The use of religion by populist parties: the case of Italy and its broader implications

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ABSTRACT

The rise of populist parties in Europe and the increasing salience of religion in political discourse are two relevant, sometimes discussed as interrelated, phenomena of recent decades. While most analysis focuses on right-wing populism, this does not exhaust all possible relationships. This study addresses the role of religion in populist parties by focusing on the Italian case and adopting a comparative cross organisational perspective shedding light on how left-wing and right-wing populists use religion for different purposes. Drawing on interview data with party representatives and analysis of organisational documents and speeches, we explore the presence and the uses of religious appeals in the two populist Italian parties in recent years. We show that their use of religion varies on three dimensions: i) hierarchy of identifications, ii) salience, and iii) frame. The League represents 'cultural populism': religion is used as an 'identity marker' that is highly salient and an instrument for framing specific topics. Conversely, the Five Star Movement exemplifies 'political/economic populism', in which religion as an identifier is present but less salient and used to frame citizenship in juridical/legalist terms. These different usages of religion lead to different definitions of the 'people' and therefore in-group constituencies.

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Religion; populism(s); Italy; Islam; frames; political mobilisation

Introduction: religion at the centre of the populist backlash

The Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, 5SM) and League (*Lega*)[1] populist cabinet broke down in August 2019, after one year. Upon the League's no confidence motion in its own government, the then Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte presented his resignation. During the discussion of the motion, Conte criticised the use of religious symbols in political rallies by the League's leader. The latter responded by kissing a rosary in the chamber, to which the former answered that those behaviours had nothing to do with the principles of religious freedom and secularism of the Italian state.[2]

In May 2019 a rift opened between the then Italian Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, and the Papacy. In several public debates and rallies, Salvini invoked the 'Madonna' (the mother of Christ) and used a rosary to support his political positions.[3] The Church is often used as a 'flag' by the League, in order to bolster various party positions. However, not only

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has Salvini targeted Pope Francis's more progressive views, but religious authorities close to the pope have criticised the League's leader's improper political use of faith symbols in his political campaigning.

In April 2017, in view of the upcoming 2018 Italian national elections, the leader of the 5SM (Luigi di Maio) gave a long interview to the Catholic newspaper *Avvenire*.[4] Various newspapers suggested that the party had become a consolidated interlocutor of the Church and noted several convergences between the 5SM and the Church (e.g. 'reddito di cittadinanza' or the fight against poverty).

These anecdotes illustrate the relationship between populism and religion in the West. Even if they allude to religious symbols, the populist radical right is still largely secular; it uses religion to stoke a cultural backlash against Muslims and foreigners. Rather than referring to religion as faith, these populists use it as 'a marker of European identity' (Berntzen 2020; Brubaker 2017b; Roy 2016a) and to forge a new consensus in societies that seem to have lost their moral centre.

It is important to note that despite religion not shaping attitudes and identity in the way it did a few decades ago, on the supply side (i.e. political parties) it is gaining increasing salience. Despite limited evidence so far, some academics suggest that radical right parties will increase their references to religion following a nativist division between native in-groups and outgroups (Schwörer and Fernández-García 2020).

The re-emergence of 'religious language' is not exclusive to western polities (e.g. Trump and evangelical Christianity; Salvini and Catholicism), but is also present in Latin America (Bolsonaro, supported by Pentecostalism) and Asia (Modi with Hindu nationalism) (Steinmetz-Jenkins and Jager 2019). In this sense, the Italian case can be understood as part of broader global trend in which populist leaders, especially on the right, make use of religion for political purposes and gains (Yabanci and Talensky 2018).

Despite being relatively under-researched, the role of religion in political mobilisation in contemporary liberal democracies is slowly gaining traction in scholarship, and it is addressed, in part, though the lens of populists' increasing use of religious rhetoric in a secularised world (Berntzen 2020; Brubaker 2017b; DeHanas and Shterin 2018; Marzouki and McDonnell 2016; Zúquete 2017). However, because the populist right politicises religion most vocally, we lack knowledge about how other populist parties interact with religion. Moreover, comparative analyses are absent.

In this study, we use the recent 'varieties of populism' literature (Caiani and Graziano 2019; Ivaldi, Lanzone, and Woods 2017; Pappas 2016) to investigate *the presence, forms, and role of religion in different types of populist parties*. We focus on Italy and use a triangulation of primary and secondary data – party manifestos, leaders' speeches and public statements, and interviews with elected party representatives, officers, and members[5] – to assess the extent to which concerns regarding religion, and in particular Islam, are present in the discourses and agendas of both 5SM and the League. We show that the two parties' use of religion is both contrasting and flexible. They espouse distinct models of political opposition and consequently of incorporation of religion into 'the people'. Religious issues have different salience in the parties' public discourse, leading to different positions within their hierarchies of identification (i.e. the interaction between immigration, religion, and identity – and consequently populism and nativism). In particular, the hierarchy of identifications links the construction of the people to specific frames[6] on immigration and religion. By using the concept of 'frames' rather than

referring to 'ideology' (thin or thick) we can address the broad discursive variations among populist parties (Caiani and della Porta 2011; Snow and Byrd 2007).

In the following section, we illustrate the roles and relationships that religion fulfils in politics and populism. Then we delve into our sources and data and contextualise populists' opportunities (political and discursive) for the use of religion in Italy. Finally, we explore similarities and differences between how the League and 5SM develop the nexus between populism and religion.

Religion, politics, and populism

Politics and religion come hand-in-hand in modern societies (Augusteijn, Dassen, and Janse 2013). Given the upswing of radical right parties that present themselves as defenders of Christianity against the supposed Muslim threat, several scholars focusing on the (populist) radical right and religion support the 'religion on the rise in politics' thesis, suggesting that religion is on the rise in party competition in Europe (e.g. Schwörer and Fernández-García 2020).

Specifically, religion can perform several functions in collective organisations such as parties or movements (Burns and Kniss 2013). It can play a key role in the *mobilising tactics* of groups, regardless of their secular or religious backgrounds, as has happened in many of the most influential social movements across the world (Haynes 2007). Indeed, it can legitimise organisations and provide a moral justification for activism by referring to a 'higher truth' in the face of challenges from outside forces (Smith 1996, 9). Religion can also help to create and reinforce *collective identities*, either via opposition or community development (Haynes 1995). It also offers emotional resources for mobilisation as a source of 'ready-made symbols, ritual, and solidarities that can be accessed and appropriated by movement leaders' (Tarrow 1998, 112).

Moreover, religious groups are embedded in broader *networks* of movements and can provide organisational resources, networks, frames, and mobilisation, and facilitate recruitment and propaganda distribution (Burns and Kniss 2013). For instance, religious social networks have contributed to the success of many historical and contemporary social movements (such as the antislavery, civil rights, temperance, and peace movements) (Beckford 2003). Additionally, religious groups can provide trained leadership capable of motivating and attracting participants (Smith 1996, 13). Religion, therefore, can be a 'powerful source of inspiration and motivation, as well as being valuable in terms of providing organizational resources for any collective actors' (Tarrow 1998, 31–32). Thus, in seeking to understand new ways of affecting social changes, it is relevant to investigate the ways in which religion, in its various manifestations, interacts with contemporary populist organisations. Populism has been alternatively defined as ideology ('thin' or 'weak', which holds society to be ultimately separated in two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: 'the pure People' vs. 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will [*volonté générale*] of the people; Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Mudde 2004), and as rhetoric (marked by the unscrupulous use and instrumentalisation of diffuse public sentiments of anxiety and disenchantment, and appealing to the power of the common people in order to challenge the legitimacy of the current political establishment, Abts and Rummens 2007). It has also been defined as communication style (namely without intermediaries, but also as a political strategy to conquer power, Tarchi 2015; Urbinati 2014; as a founding father of the discursive camp,

see Laclau 1977), and as organisation (characterised by the presence of a charismatic, personalistic and institutionalised – not belonging to the ruling elite – leadership, Eatwell 2003; Kriesi 2018) (for a review, see Caiani and Graziano 2019). Acknowledging the complexity of the terminological debate, which is beyond our goals to address, we identify our empirical referent by referring to the PopuList of commonly defined populist parties in Europe (Roodujin and Van Kessel et al. 2019).[7]

More specifically, when it comes to populism and religion, there are two main approaches. In the first, scholars focus on religious movements and actors that make use of a populist apparatus; in the second, the focus is on populist political movements that use quasi-religious messages (Zúquete 2017).

Drawing on Apahideanu (2014), Zúquete (2017, 445) suggests that the core essence of religious populism is populism, which has been reshaped in a religious fashion. For example, the nineteenth century US People's party framed their populism through Protestant evangelism (Williams and Alexander 1994). Likewise, in the early 2000s, Greek Orthodox authorities opposed religious freedom reforms in schools by dividing society and politics into an opposition between the 'people' of the church ('us'), and the atheist, modernising, intellectualist, and repressive establishment ('them') (Stavrakakis 2002).

In the second approach, a political religion is considered to emerge when populist parties and leaders use semi-religious overtones of a redemptive character (Silva and Vieira 2018; Zúquete 2017). Populists 'preach impending doom, [and] they offer salvation' (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, 5), by 'appeal[ing] to a purifying or salvationist rupture' (Tanguieff 2007, 48) and the 'promised land' that involves a 'process of sacralization of politics, that happens when politics acquires a transcendent nature' (Zúquete 2017, 450). Zúquete (2013, 2017) refers to a form of political messianism in which certain ideologies acquire (and capitalise on) a religious character. For example, both Jean Marie Le Pen and Hugo Chavez incorporate a messianic status into their leader-personas, using moral archetypes, which includes elements such as being a prophet, martyr, leader of the people and the common man.

Finally, a more recent literature addresses the relation between populism and religion from the 'politicisation of religion' angle, which can also be taken as an instrumental use of religion for political gains. Despite their secular (and neopagan) roots and open conflict with the church (Marzouki and McDonnell 2016, 1–2), far-right populists are seen as using Christianity as 'marker of identity' to target Muslims (Brubaker 2017b; DeHanas and Shretin 2018; Roy 2016b; Zúquete 2017). Even if religious beliefs are not at the core of many of these parties, religion would however work as a frame for political mobilisation (Minkenberg 2018). The rise of right-wing populism has been related by some scholars to Islamophobia, understood as 'an electoral strategy that targets not only Muslims and Islam in general, but also the incumbent leaders' (Oztig, Gurkan, and Aydin 2020, 2). This way populist parties would aim 'to stimulate distrust of the mainstream political parties by presenting them as uninterested in or incapable' of defending the people against Muslims (Oztig, Gurkan, and Aydin 2020, 13). However, various combinations of (right-wing) ideologies and frames can emerge: for example, the French National Front bridges a critique of the Catholic Church (as part of the establishment) with liberal positions on immigration, family values, and sexuality (Roy 2016b). Despite their secular views, these groups distinguish between supposedly civilised Christian and allegedly regressive

Table 1. Relationships between politics and religion.

		What	
		Religion	Politics
Who	Religious	Fundamentalism (?)	Religious populism [Religious politicisation]
	Secular	**Marker of identity [Politicisation of religion]**	Missionary populism [Sacralisation of politics]

Source: Authors' elaboration from previous research on populism and religion

Islamic cultures (Brubaker 2017b; DeHanas and Shterin 2018). In this regard, invoking religion in secularised societies can work as a weapon that establishes belonging.

In this context Israel emerges as a case where, as Porat and Filc (2020) remark, religion and the people cannot be separated due to the religious nature of the state. In this country, both inclusionary and exclusionary populist parties use religion in their discourse. In the case of Likud, religion 'demarcate[s] the boundaries of nationhood, excluding non-Jewish citizens, and to establish hierarchies of loyalty within the Jewish nation' (Porat and Filc 2020, 15), i.e. this populist party uses religion to exclude non-Jews from their concept of people. Shas, a small party that represents ultra-Orthodox Sephardic Jews, uses religion as an inclusive means of integrating lower-class Jews, usually excluded from top positions.

The relationship between populism and religion is, in sum, a heterogeneous one that can be conceptualised, in our view, according to different combinations of possible actors (religious or secular) and the sphere of their claims (religion or politics), as comprising three types (see Table 1): *religious politicisation*; missionary populism which refers to the *sacralisation of politics*, and the politicisation of religion which uses religion as a *marker of identity*.

Current analysis of European populism usually focuses on secular actors that politicise religion with the goal of mobilising, identity building, and propaganda. The question of how different types of populism integrate religion into their discourses and agendas has yet to be addressed. Against this analytical background, we therefore investigate how varieties of populisms in Italy use religion – particularly in regard to Islam – in their populist appeal (when defining the people, the elites, the antagonism between them, the leader), leading to possible different paths within the same category of religion '*as a marker of identity*'. In addition, because religion serves in many and often simultaneous capacities (defining and mobilising constituents, building in- and outgroup identities and antagonism, crafting leadership, propaganda, etc.), we consider how different populisms make use of these different functions.

Contextualising religion and politics in Italy

When focusing on political actors and their relationship with religion, we must also consider the broader institutional and religious context (Mohseni and Wilcox 2009), as more or less 'favourable' to this nexus. Italy is a crucial case for the study of populism and religion for three reasons: First, it has a special relationship with the Vatican. Second, it received one of the largest inflows (in Europe) of immigrants and refugees over the last decade. Finally, the presence of two successful but different populist parties lends an interesting comparative opportunity.

The simultaneous and striking success of two different populist parties in the 2018 national elections disrupted the party system: the 'hybrid'[8] populist Five Star Movement

(Caiani 2019), which – after its astonishing electoral debut in 2013 (with 27% of the votes) – reached 32%, and the right-wing populist League, which, with a reinvigorated ideology and leadership, achieved an unprecedented 17% of the vote. Together, they formed an 'all populist government' (Pirro 2018). However, if we look at the relationship between religion and those who vote for the League and 5SM, they do not appear to be particularly religious people (see Table 2). Despite this fact, the parties can still be religiously oriented as a way of establishing a collective identity, as posited by Ozzano (2020).

In recent years, in Italy as in Europe, several controversies related to ethno-cultural and religious issues have entered public debate. Lindekilde (2008) refers to these events as 'multicultural crises', or conflicts that revolve around ethno-cultural differences and can therefore inflame political actors (such as right-wing populists) who capitalise on identitarian definitions of their constituencies. When it comes to controversies about religious and cultural issues, Italy represents a paradigmatic case for the crucial role of the Vatican (and the related embeddedness of cultural debates in national politics) and the new opportunities for right-wing populist mobilisation due to recent immigration (not significant until the 1990s), which found citizens and politicians 'unprepared' (Castelli Gattinara 2017). Moreover, the country's geographical position fuelled xenophobic rhetoric that portrayed the recent arrival of refugees as an 'out-of-control situation' or even an 'invasion' (Castelli Gattinara 2017). Public controversies regarding the secular-religious cleavage (for example debates on end of life care, religious education in schools, mosque construction, and Muslim dress codes; see Castelli 2017; Ozzano and Giorgi 2015), have long been present in Italian politics. Even before the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack, the original cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published in *Jyllands-Posten* (Castelli Gattinara 2017) were published by several mainstream Italian newspapers (including *La Padania*, the official newspaper of the Northern League). Two opposing camps emerged (Lindekilde 2008): some underlined the freedom of the press to examine religious values and rules, whereas others questioned the misuse of this freedom, describing the cartoons as Islamophobic, blasphemous, and offensive towards Muslims (Castelli Gattinara 2017).

Historically rooted political opportunities for linking politics and religion are also present. From the establishment of the Italian Republic after the Second World War until the early 1990s, the Christian Democrats (*Democracia Cristiana*, DC) were the dominant party with a 'primacy [. . .] in religious matters' (Giorgi 2019, 240). Moreover, with the Second Republic (1994) and DC's downfall, new political parties tried to capture Catholic votes, and there was a 'renewed political role for civil-society Catholicism' – also

Table 2. Religious attitudes among Italian voters.

	Church attendance		
	% never		
Year	*2013*	*2016*	*2018*
League	**13.64**	**26.05**	**30.52**
5SM	**24.55**	**37.52**	**39.25**
Radical Left	47.46	56.15	53.91
Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*)	23.22	34.41	40.37
Centre-Right (i.e. *Popolo della Libertà/Forza Italia*)	11.04	15.82	29.46
Catholic Centre-Right (SC-Monti-UDC; NCD)	9.26	18.19	-
Radical Right (*Fratelli d'Italia*)	-	29.11	19.12

Source: Elaboration from the authors of ITANES DATA 2013, 2016 and 2018. The percentages show those who 'never' attend religious events (for the year 2016 only these also include those who 'do not believe in any religion').

expressed in the emergence of an anti-gender movement closely linked to Catholic and conservative actors (Giorgi 2019; Lavizzari and Prearo 2019).

In Italy, religious issues are not solely in the domain of the right wing (Ozzano 2020). Over the last 15 years, mainstream parties on both the left and right have become more aligned on immigration issues, converging towards a so-called 'securitisation' of them (Caponio 2006). Thus, the radical right has successfully shaped the agenda on migration, nationalism, identity, and religion (Caiani and della Porta 2011), bringing terms such as the 'Islamisation of Europe' from the far-right fringes to the centre.[9] Because Italy has been a key point of access for immigrants, 1,400,000 Muslims live in Italy (2.3% of the population), making up almost one-third of Italy's foreign population (250,000 have acquired Italian citizenship).[10] Immigration is a central political issue, with reports of incoming boats of illegal immigrants dominating news programmes, especially in the summertime. Although illegal immigrants form a minority of Muslims in Italy, illegal immigrants do overwhelmingly come from majority-Muslim countries, propelling the framing of Islam in contemporary Italy as 'an issue' (Graziano 2018).

Indeed, perception matters (Graziano 2018): in the Italian case, after the economic crisis negative perceptions of, and attitudes towards, immigrants increased. Before 2008 less than 40% of the population considered immigrants as a threat; in 2016, 70% did (Eurobarometer). These attitudes and orientations can be interpreted as favourable 'discursive political opportunities' for populist parties (and their use of religion) in Italy, namely as a set of 'political-cultural or symbolic opportunities that determine what kind of ideas become visible for the public, resonate with public opinion and are held to be "legitimate" by the audience' (Kriesi 2004, 72).

In this study we focus solely on populist parties in Italy, however we acknowledge that a comparison with non-populist parties that use religious rhetoric such as Brother of Italy (*Fratelli di Italia*) and the Democratic Party (*Partito Democratico*), which also refer to religious or traditional values in their platform (see Ozzano 2020), would have broadened the spectrum of the various possible usages of religion by political parties in the country.

In order to disentangle the role of religion in the two Italian populist parties across time, with a particular view to their concerns around Islam and Muslims, this study draws on various data: party manifestoes at the national and European level since 2009, leaders' speeches and public statements found on the Internet, and 14 in-depth interviews conducted with party representatives and members of the Five Star movement and the League at local and national level (Appendix List A and B). The interview questionnaires, composed of open questions, focused on various topics: the conception of nationhood and citizenship; the relation between majority and minority in a democracy; economic and political issues; the future of Europe and issues of migration and cultural identity.

Lega: the clash of civilisations and 'silent' counter-crusade

Concerns around Islam and Muslims figure explicitly in the League's agenda, though the party's xenophobic attitudes and definitions of the 'Other' have shifted significantly over time. Guolo (2011) proposes that the relation between the party and the Catholic Church is atypical and can be characterised as religion without a church, whereby religious identification coincides with the local community and identity. This proposition is in line with Ozzano's (2020) argument which shows that initially the League did not fully

display a religious identity in the 1990s. Nonetheless, through time, with the transformation of the party system and the increasing pre-eminence of the party, it shifted its focus to display an orientation towards religious identity, i.e. it became a religiously oriented party.

As a result, beginning in 2013 under Salvini's leadership, these issues became increasingly salient, and the League – which had long combined regionalism with radical right populism (Zaslove 2011) – entered a new phase, rapidly becoming even closer to the exclusionary populist party ideal type. Once an ethno-regionalist and independentist party, the League is now a nationalist party with countrywide appeal. During the 2014 European elections, for example, Salvini identified *only* the EU (and the Euro currency in particular) and migrants as enemies, abandoning the anti-Southern Italy rhetoric.

National identity/nationhood

In the political discourse and actions of the League, 'the people' refers to an ethnonational in-group that it defends and represents (i.e. the Italian people, the nation, the country) (Caiani and della Porta 2011). Outsiders are deemed to be enemies of the party and the state (all defined in terms of identity and culture as non-Italians, non-Europeans, non-Christians) (Giorgi 2019; Molle 2018). This dichotomy emerges even more clearly vis-à-vis Muslim immigrants, who are portrayed as endorsing a culture completely different from both Italy's and Europe's (already seen in the 2004 and 2009 European party manifestos) (Caiani and Graziano 2016).

Interviewees stressed the incompatibility between Islam and Italian culture, saying that one cannot be both a full Italian citizen and a Muslim due to the inability to adopt national costumes (interviews 6 and 14). The League is a nationalist, religiously oriented party, in which there is a 'subordination of religious orientation to strong nationalist sentiments' that antagonises outsiders (Ozzano 2013). Immigrants, and Muslims in particular, become an important reference point in this rhetoric due to the League's promotion of an 'ethnicisation of religion' (Giorgi 2019, 242).

This sentiment has become especially pronounced since 2012, when the Northern League became a 'national' party, instead of a regional one. This shift prompted the party to change its definition of the 'other' or its 'enemy' from the South of Italy or 'Roma Ladrona' to immigrants.[11] Italy had been exposed to large-scale migratory flows before 2015, which explains why the League denounced the 'boom' of arrivals on Italian shores in 2013 and framed immigration as a problem for national security. Muslim immigrants are – in the words of the League's members – especially problematic because 'not all the Muslims are terrorists, but all the terrorists are Islamic' (int. 14).

In its European electoral manifesto, the League asserted the need for increased cooperation between European police forces and Italian border patrol units (League 2014, 29) and blamed the EU for being ineffective in managing non-EU immigration, proposing to counter illegal immigration 'at the source' and claiming that the EU should take responsibility (League 2014, 11). The party further demanded substantial revisions to the Dublin III Regulation, which according to it penalises Italy (League 2015). The issue of immigration and security gained new import with the rise of the Islamic State and in the wake of the Paris attacks of January 2015, which had the effect of making the League's populist Euroscepticism appear both legitimate and prescient. The migration crisis of

2015 served to bridge the issues of security – first crime, now terrorism – and (Muslim) immigration (Pirro and van Kessel 2018).

In 2018 the League's general election manifesto prominently refers to Islam in topics related to security, foreign politics, and defence. There is a specific section dedicated to 'relations with Islam', in which the League stresses the need to respect Italian laws, to forbid the public display of religious symbols, and to be transparent in terms of funding sources (League 2018, 6).

Citizenship

Many exclusionary populist parties such as the League have launched slogans and programmatic platforms expressing the necessity of 'protecting' native-born citizens 'first' ('*prima gli italiani*', echoing Trump's 'America first') at the expense of universalist social schemes, which include naturalised citizens (Graziano 2018). Several statements of support for forms of welfare chauvinism,[12] made by both the League members and elected representatives we interviewed, appear enriched also by religious discourse: in their view, being Italian is being Christian. Moreover, almost all the interviewees agree on the incompatibility of Muslim and Italian identities. One interviewee said, 'you can be both Islamic and Italian, but you cannot be both Italian and Islamist' (int. 13), but the rest of the statements were generally more straightforward and general. These focus on the supposed abuse of public services by foreigners who receive preferential treatment (int. 14) or even more drastic statements claiming that in situations of high unemployment for 'Italians', the country should not accept immigrants.

The interviewees, however, report being agnostic, atheist, or not attending religious services. Moreover, they do not share most of the public positions of the Catholic Church. This is in line with the League's electorate, which tends to have lower religious attendance than the Italian population overall (Passarelli and Tuorto 2018). They do not, however, see secularisation as an unqualified good, since 'Catholicism has left some enduring lessons, which are now part of common sense' (int. 13). In short, the League has appropriated 'Catholic heritage' without sincere belief and even while holding strong positions *against* the Catholic Church, which is seen as a 'hypocritical' institution 'detached from the people' (int. 6), particularly because of its stance on immigration.

The relationship between majority and minority populations in democracy

The League accuses western governments in general, and the Italian establishment in particular, of being excessively deferential to immigrant communities' cultures. They claim that this sensitivity poses a threat to the Italian nation and its traditions. Some interviewees were particularly emphatic when arguing about how migrants, particularly Muslim ones, should behave in their host country: one stated 'we have to behave like Christians. We have to respect them (however when someone arrives in a country, he also has to respect the country's traditions)' (int. 6). Most of the League's interviewees have an assimilationist approach regarding immigrants in general and Muslims in particular. For example, the leader of the League in Veneto argued, 'they must understand that here we have certain rules, and that they have to obey such rules. You do not like the nativity

scene? I do not care; that is your problem. There is no possible integration for you. Integration is for Christians, not for Muslims' (int. 8).

The future of EU integration and identity

The party considers immigration from southern countries to be an invasion, whereby Muslims are presented as a threat or aliens (Giorgi 2019). The theme of invasion is articulated in three distinct ways: first, invasion will lead to replacement. For instance, one interviewee claimed: '[You just have to look at] public declarations by leaders like Erdoğan. They want to do what they did in Kosovo. At the end of the nineteenth century, five percent of the population was Albanian. Both Albanians and Serbs are not peaceful peoples, I admit, but after a few decades the proportion was the opposite' (int. 8). Second, Islam is a religion of 'Conquista' (conquering) in which 'Islamic penetration in Italy is financed, is planned from above [...] by the Gulf states, by rich Islamic countries. Otherwise, they would host the refugees, but they aim to change the demography of our societies'.

Finally, the League's answer to 'invasion' and keeping Italy Italian is one of 'walls and no rights'. This was congruent with the party's aspiration to defend nation-states against the diktats of EU bureaucrats and to prevent 'the death of the European culture' (Pirro and van Kessel 2018, 335). For example, a provincial party leader in Tuscany argued, 'Europe should serve to help the nation-states, but this is clearly not the case [...] The integration process started on the right note. It was a cultural union of different traditions respecting each other, of cooperation [but it evolved in the wrong way]. I don't like homogeneity; I am for respecting local traditions' (int. 13).

Five Star Movement: secularism and internal pluralism

The 5SM is a secularist party that displays a plurality of positions (Palano 2016) and in which religion is less salient (when compared with the League). But differences emerge (i.e. different souls, inclusive and exclusive – Mudde and Katwasser 2013) between the official position of the party (i.e. the party's central office) and its members (i.e. the party on the ground), especially at local level. In fact, there are many issues that bring the two worlds (5SM and the Catholic Church) close: the so-called 'citizenship income' ('which is not paternalism', said Grillo in 2017), the controversy over the festive openings of shopping centres (the 'ruin of families', according to the leader), but also the fight against poverty and gambling. Moreover it is worth noting that on his blog the leader often links the Movement's birth (on 4 October) with the feast of Saint Francis, a symbol of poverty.

National identity/nationhood

On his blog, Beppe Grillo, a comedian who initiated the movement that would lead to the creation of the party and who led it informally until 2013, progressively adopted a nativist and exclusionary framing of immigration that placed the 5SM closer to the League. Grillo started addressing the 'taboo' of immigration as early as 2006, denouncing the perils of importing migrant labour and the social disruptions it caused (cited in Pirro 2018). The following year Grillo said: 'A country cannot burden its citizens with the problems caused

by tens of thousands of Roma who come to Italy from Romania [. . .] What is a government that does not guarantee security for its citizens? [. . .] Once the borders of the Patria were sacred, [but now] politicians have desecrated them' (Pirro 2018).

In fact, most of the 5SM representatives and members interviewed showed a strong inclination towards nationalism. The statement 'we are Italians' often recurred during the interviews. One representative stressed that '[Italian] national identity is primarily a cultural one', adding, 'Our national culture is influenced by our religious culture. This does not necessarily need to be positively evaluated, as the public institutions should be more secularised [. . .] at the same time, it is not necessarily a bad thing, as religion is a source of important values' (int. 7). In addition to the cultural dimension, many 5SM members also highlighted a political national identity in which 'being Italian means to be carriers of democratic values, first of all, and also carriers of culture, as we are the heirs of ancient cultures that deeply marked the broader western culture' (int. 12).

Furthermore, when asked if they feel a primarily European, national (own country), or regional affiliation, they largely answer 'national' or 'regional', with 'European' identity in second or third place. For example, a 5SM mayor reports to 'be proud of wearing Italian symbols, like the national band during ceremonies referring to the Second World War [. . .] I feel Venetian, first of all, then Italian, and then European' (int. 5).

However, 5SM interviewees hold various views on immigration (with, in particular, differences between party members and elected representatives). They feel: *i*. immigration is not a priority of the country (it is 'not a priority. It is one among many other important topics for the country' or 'it is a problem like other problems the country has: social, economic, etc' [int. 9, 7, 12]). *ii*. Immigration is not equated with terrorism or crime. One said, 'I do not care about immigration because of its supposed link with terrorism. It is true that if you do not control the phenomenon, as has occurred in some areas in Belgium or France, you will have some problems, also related to drug trafficking. However, the topic is much broader and more complex' (int. 7). And *iii*. immigrants have 'rights'. The problem is not immigration *per se*, but the fact that it is not regulated well by Italian law. As one representative stresses, 'We are facing a war between poor peoples'; another says, 'Immigrants should work . . . regularly! [. . .] Instead the job market has become a matter of political exchange, [to the] detriment of the weakest' (int. 12).

Citizenship

Over time, the 5SM nevertheless veered towards the right on immigration. As in the case of the League, the topic of illegal immigration appeared in the party's rhetoric before the refugee crisis in Europe (Grillo 2013). The 5SM repeatedly referred to Italy as the 'refugee camp of Europe' (Pirro 2018).

Within the party, opinions about the rights that immigrants merit vary. According to some of the interviewees, for example, the policy of the 'citizens' income' should not exclude immigrants (e.g. int. 3 and 10). However, for most interviewees, citizenship is not 'ethnic' or 'identitarian'; instead, they underline civic and legal aspects. For example, a 5SM mayor reports that 'I grant five to six new citizenships per month [. . .] I am very proud of it, all of them are nice people and often I know them personally, since this is a small town' (int. 5). Some stress that '[immigration is an acceptable phenomenon when we guarantee] some order, some rules in its management, instead of the current chaos'

(int. 9). Similarly, 'the *ius soli/ius sanguinis* is a false dilemma. Children's rights must be always guaranteed' (int. 12). Even in terms of employment, '[immigrants] often do work that Italians do not intend to do and are exploited by criminal organisations' (int. 7).

Restrictive notions of citizenship and immigration have been present in the discourse of the 5SM since 2012 (Pirro 2018). However, many of the 5SM representatives and members interviewed stressed that the law – and not ethnic origin or religion – leads to social harmony. For example, one activist claims, 'It is not religion, but the absence of the rule-of-law that makes integration more difficult [. . .] few and effective rules would permit all to live together without major problems' (int. 7, see also int. 10). In fact, when asked which rights the migrants should enjoy, many of the 5SM interviewees emphasise 'the same rights as us, with the [same] respective duties' (int. 9).

On the definition of citizenship (and exclusion) it is also worth noting the mixed positions held by the 5SM on the law for civil unions, which has been received positively by (part of) the Church and Catholic voters.

The relation between majority and minority

With the refugee crisis, the threat of ISIS, and the increasing salience of immigration, the 5SM leader proposed the repatriation of illegal immigrants as Italy has become the 'waiting room of the miserable' (Grillo 2014a). In August 2015, Grillo posted a four-point policy proposal on his blog (Pirro 2018), aiming to: *i*. cut down residence permits for humanitarian reasons; *ii*. establish an efficient system for forced repatriation when asylum applications are rejected; *iii*. establish a specific procedure for the resolution of appeals to the rejection of those applications; *iv*. keep refugees under closer surveillance (Grillo 2015a). The substantive content of Grillo's proposal fits within the 'law and order' nativist framing of exclusionary populist parties across Europe (Pirro 2018).

However, representatives and members of the party describe a different picture. To them, pluralism can be established in daily life, especially at local level. For example, several interviewees stress that in their experience, Muslim families and citizens integrate and participate actively in community life (e.g. taking Italian language courses) (int. 5), without questioning their own religious values. Alternatively, those '[. . .] who live in a country [have] to obey to the existing law. This does not imply "cultural assimilation", instead it is a matter of civic living together, of respect of the rules of the country' (int. 12).

The future of EU integration and identity

The bulk of the party's platform on immigration criticises the Dublin Regulation signed by Berlusconi and the League – a leitmotiv throughout the migrant crisis (Pirro 2018). The 5SM proposed to relocate humanitarian aid towards the countries of departure and lift the burden imposed on countries of first arrival (Grillo 2014b).

The party further criticises EU institutions for their decisional stalemate (Grillo 2015a) and denounced the selfishness of member states that arbitrarily suspended the Schengen Agreement (Grillo 2015b). A national representative of the 5SM says: 'The [European] political class promises a lot of things, but it did not do anything concrete [. . .] Italy has been left alone, also because of [the behaviour of previous governments]: you cannot exchange some budgetary flexibility just for rescuing some banks' (int. 12).

However, a different picture emerges from the interviews with 5SM's local representatives: they consider it possible to integrate different cultures in Europe. When asked 'Could Europe still be called "Europe" if it were not mostly white and Christian anymore?', a local political representative answered that immigration in Europe 'brings a cultural enrichment [...] our culture is not necessarily either superior or perfect. [...] We should take into consideration each person, individually, not "peoples"' (int. 5).

In sum, among 5SM representatives and militants, concerns about Muslims are either absent or covert (through references to culture, demography, immigration, and particularly, the role of the EU as an enabler of immigration). When asked about 'Islam and Muslim immigrants', the majority of 5SM interviewees expressed a neutral and universalistic vision – one which sees Islam as potentially compatible with other religions and western values: 'if you respect both the rights and the duties of citizens, being Christian, Buddhist, or Confucian makes no difference' (int. 5). However, some contradictions do arise when pressed on specific issues such as gender or political involvement (e.g. int 5, 12). For example, when asked if Muslim representatives should have the right to take part in local public institutions, an interviewee replied, 'Yes, if we are talking about Muslim citizens forming part of political parties to be elected into public institutions. No, if we are talking about Muslim parties [...] religion and politics should be clearly separated' (int. 9). Similarly, another interviewee noted that Muslim immigrants 'are not particularly open toward their host country' (int. 12), although 'terrorism is just a symptom, a consequence of the lack of policies promoting international peace [...] the most important [thing] is to allocate more resources to poor neighbourhoods, to hospitality, to solidarity, to culture' (int. 12). Most of the interviewees insisted on the need for law (and partly order), immigration regulation, and social inclusion (e.g. int. 1, 3, 10) as solutions for avoiding the dangers related to immigration (like crime) or radicalisation.

Table 3 summarises the different features illustrated so far regarding the relation with religion in the two different types of Italian populism.

In sum, our analysis shows that the two Italian populist parties incorporate religion into their discourse differently (and to a different extent), depending on what we can call: *i*. hierarchy of identifications (namely the linkages between immigration, religion, and identity); *ii*. salience of religion; and *iii*. types of frames of religion. The League is characterised by strong use of religion as a 'marker of identity' (which is conceptualised mainly

Table 3. Populism and religion in Italy between opportunities and resources.

	Open 'discursive opportunities' (i.e. role of religion as? divisive in public life and electoral arena)	*Institutional design influent on populist parties and Islam*	*Concerns around Islam 'covert'*	*National identity / nationhood* (ethnic vs. juridical)	*Citizenship* (identitarian/ cultural vs. civic)	*Relation btw majority and minority in democracy*
The League	x	-	.	Ethnic	Cultural/ identitarian	Prominence majority
5SM	x	-	x	Mainly juridical (but sometimes ethnic)	Mainly civic (but sometimes cultural)	Mainly pluralism

Legend: – 'absent or weak', x 'present/strong'

Table 4. Politicisation of religion and the two types of Italian populism.

	Religion and Populism	
	5SM	League
Marker of identity	Weak	Strong
National identity	Juridical	Ethnic
Citizenship	Civic	Cultural/Identitarian
Majority/Minority in democracy	Pluralism	Majority

in ethno-cultural terms, and reinforced in that by this bridge with religion); a high salience of religion; and an instrumental use of religion to frame race and immigration so as to perform a crisis (Moffitt 2015) (i.e. create fear and distrust). In contrast, in the 5SM's populist appeal religion, although present, does not occupy the same location and importance in constructing the people. It is not used to politicise a particular topic such as immigration, but rather to emphasise a juridical/legalist conceptualisation of citizenship (i.e. the 5SM 'people') (see Table 4 for a summary).

Conclusion

Recent data (October 2020) on religion and politics in Italy from SWG[13] shows that support for Pope Francis is linked to political orientation. While 58% of centre-right voters (which includes League voters) position themselves against the pope, only 9% of 5SM supporters express the same opinion (whereas 37% of them are in favour of the current pope's religious guidance). This difference between parties illustrates our findings and testifies to the significant links between populism(s) and religion in Italy. Populism is a highly flexible discourse that adapts to and bridges between other discourses (Caiani and della Porta 2011). As such, religion is not solely a feature of the populist radical right, nor need it be necessarily conservative. At the same time, some data from ITANES on Italian voters indicate that (pro)religious sentiments are decreasing over time among sympathisers both of the League and 5SM: the number of those who do not belong to any religion and declare they never attend religious services increased from 13% (2013) to 26% (2016) to 30% (2018) for the League and from 24% (2013) to 37% (2016) to 39% (2018) for the 5SM.[14] This is not a contradiction with our findings, instead it points to what Oliver Roy refers to as a disconnection between faith communities and sociocultural identities in modern societies. Religion is more about belonging to a nation than belief for populists, with religious identities and traditions being deployed to define who can and cannot be part of 'the people'.

In our study, comparing two different types of populisms and various data (i.e. the institutional party discourse vs. the informal public one: electoral manifestos, leaders' speeches and statements, and interviews with party representatives and party members) reveals that religion has emerged to play two important roles for the (right-wing) League and the (hybrid or left-wing) 5SM. First, it defines *identity* (i.e. the people the party wants to represent and defend), clarifying who should be included and 'the other' (who should be excluded). Second, it establishes and reifies inequalities and *hierarchies* (Ostiguy 2017; Panizza 2017): populists rely on different 'hierarchies of identifications' when building their conceptions of the people, showing specificities in their treatment of the nexus

between people, immigration, and religion. The League presents ‘cultural populism’, or secular groups’ classic method of politicising religion: it is used as an identity marker that is *highly salient* and an instrument for framing specific topics such as national identity and immigration, thereby interlinking the three and legitimising party claims. As observed for many European right-wing populist parties, the League is not so much Christian as anti-Muslim. It replaces the classic cleavage between church and state with a division between Civilised and Barbarian (Kratochvíl 2019). Conversely, the 5SM exemplifies ‘political/economic populism’, in which religion as an identifier is *present but less salient*. The political discourse of the party (although with some differences between party members and representatives), allows for a distinction between religion and immigration linked to a legalistic and civic understanding of citizenship and national identity. In sum, the different salience of religion in the two parties points to different *hierarchies of identifications*. It plays a central role in the League’s frames, but the 5SM is more focused on inequalities.

Moreover, although both parties use the identity construction function of religion, only the League uses its *mobilising and legitimising roles*. As pointed out by Brubaker (2017a) if populism builds vertical oppositions between top and bottom, it also does so horizontally by distinguishing between insiders and outsiders. There is nothing specifically populist about this kind of culturalisation, racialisation, or naturalisation of inequality, however, as also our data demonstrated ‘it becomes populist when elites [. . .] are blamed for prioritising or privileging in some way those who are at once on the bottom and outside, while neglecting the problems and predicaments of ordinary people’. Finally, in the case of the League, although the party does not fulfil the characteristics of ‘missionary populism’, the use of religion by its leader does resemble some elements of the ‘sacralisation of politics’.

Our findings and interpretation are in line with other studies (e.g. Yabanci and Talenski 2018). However, two avenues for future research can be explored. Firstly, how the discourses used by populist parties on religion legitimise inequalities, identities, and belonging, not only in Europe but also in other countries around the world and with different predominant faiths, is an important area for further research. As reported throughout this contribution, we can observe similarities in the use of religion by populist political parties. However, it would be interesting to expand the findings of this research to understand whether the logic of legitimation and opposition works in the same way, across more countries and more cases of populist parties. Secondly, in line with the varieties of populism research programme, our contribution shows that comparative analysis between parties is important since adding inclusionary populism to the analysis can illuminate the action of populist parties more broadly. Religion does not appear solely within the discourse of populist radical right parties, and we should aim at expanding the scope of our research.

Notes

1. Lega Nord or Northern League changed its name upon Salvini´s leadership. In this contribution we use its most recent formulation.
2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xV18fV_9FCc
3. https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2019/05/20/salvini-invoca-la-madonna-e-attacca-il-papa-ma-il-mondo-cattolico-non-combatte-abbastanza/5192762/

4. https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/noi-al-governo-sar-naturale
5. The interviews were conducted with informed consent from the participants. A full list of the interviewees is available in the appendix.
6. Frames are defined as cognitive instruments that allow making sense of the external reality (Benford and Snow 1992). They provide the necessary background within which individual activists can locate their actions (Snow et al. 1986).
7. The PopuList project and data can be found via the following link: https://popu-list.org/
8. Every classification of parties is likely to raise objections. We prefer 'hybrid' to 'left-wing' or 'inclusionary populism' in relation to the 5SM, although many comparative studies adopt this terminology (Font, Graziano, and Zakatika 2019; Ivaldi, Lanzone, and Woods 2017). Despite its initial left-wing position, the current ideological nature of the 5SM is ambiguous and eclectic (Ceccarini and Bordignon 2016; Corbetta et al. 2018; Mosca and Tronconi 2019; Pirro 2018). The party is also described as a 'valence populist party' (Zulianello 2020).
9. According to a 2016 Eurostat survey, 49% of Italian respondents chose immigration as one of the two most important issues facing the EU (vs. 45% of European respondents overall).
10. Census, 'Immigrazione in Italia 2016: i numeri dell'appartenenza religiosa', ismu.org 18 July 2016. Moreover, a report from Caritas (2020) shows that between 2000 and 2019 the number of international migrants in Italy rose from about two thousand to six thousand, which represents an increase of 10.4%. For 2019 alone the Ministry of the Interior counted about 41,000 irregular immigrants at the border.
11. 'Roma Ladrona' is a derogatory term employed by the League to refer to the corruption in Rome (Italy's capital and centre of government) that 'steals' resources from the well-organised northern part of the country.
12. Welfare chauvinism refers to a position taken by radical parties whereby welfare should only benefit native and deserving citizens at the expense of underserving immigrants (see Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016).
13. https://www.swg.it/
14. To investigate the religious attitudes of Italian citizens we relied on the ITANES (Italian Election Studies) survey, which was based on a representative sample of Italian voters (http://www.itanes.org/dati/).

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