It had a mythical beginning, still visible, if ambiguous, to itself and to its audience: before there was Russia, there was Russia; before there was France and England, there was France and England; but before there was America there was no America. America was discovered, and what was discovered was not a place, one among others, but a setting, the backdrop of a destiny. It began as theater.

Stanley Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*”

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
...
(America never was America to me.)

Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again”

In December of 2015, Jerry Falwell, Jr., son of the late American preacher Jerry Falwell Sr. and President of Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, urged students at the private Christian university to carry guns on campus following a mass shooting in San Bernardino, California. The *Washington Post* reports that Falwell touted a free course for students wishing to acquire permits to carry concealed weapons:

“It just blows my mind that the president of the United States [Barack Obama] [says] that the answer to circumstances like that is more gun control,” he said to applause.

“If some of those people in that community center had what I have in my back pocket right now. . .” he said while being interrupted by louder cheers and clapping. “Is it illegal to pull it out? I don’t know,” he said, chuckling.
“I’ve always thought that if more good people had concealed-carry permits, then we could end those Muslims before they walked in,” he says, the rest of his sentence drowned out by loud applause while he said, “and killed them.”

Falwell’s remarks were denounced by numerous commentators, and Falwell later said that he had been referring to Islamic terrorists, not to Muslims generally. Be that as it may, his remarks point to a troubling dimension of the nexus of American evangelicalism and right-wing politics, which has come to particular prominence with the election of Donald Trump, who – seemingly improbably, given his reputation as an irreligious libertine – garnered approximately 80 percent of the white evangelical vote and continues to enjoy significant support among that constituency in the United States. In addition to their explicit endorsement of violence, Falwell’s remarks are notable for the way they frame the conflict as between “good people” and two mortal enemies – first, “those Muslims” and second, a President who fails to appreciate the significance of the former threat and cannot be trusted to protect the good people from it.

Falwell’s enthusiasm for the Second Amendment and gun culture is of course a distinctively American phenomenon, but his anti-Islamic rhetoric and suspicion of elites are not. Anti-Islamism is also on the rise in much of Europe, and there too the “good people” are often conceived as threatened from both above/within – by feckless “elites” – and below/outside – by Muslims and non-white immigrants. Though myriad examples might be noted – including Fidesz in Hungary, Lega and the 5-Star Movement in Italy, Independent Greeks and Golden Dawn in Greece, Law and Justice in Poland, the Swiss People’s Party, UKIP, and the Austrian Freedom Party, to name just a few – I focus in this essay on Germany, and, in particular, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, because the German examples are interestingly similar and dissimilar to some of the American ones and will be useful in distinguishing different threads within the

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assemblage of contemporary political movements commonly dubbed “right-wing populisms.” Though much could be said about these movements—their origins, aims, methods, family-resemblances, global ecology, and the grievances they cultivate and draw upon—my interest in comparing them here is limited: I would like to consider some of the various ways in which discourse about religion, particularly about Islam and Christianity, functions and circulates in them—how it is used to demarcate the boundaries of “the people,” and what this says about the anxieties of sovereignty and the larger political-theological imagination.

Within these movements, discourse about religion often functions so as to demarcate “the people,” separating an in-group—often “Christians”—from an out-group—often “Muslims.” In the introductory chapter of Saving the People, a volume they co-edited with Olivier Roy, Nadia Marzouki and Duncan McDonnell contend that “the populist use of religion is much more about ‘belonging’ than ‘belief’.” On this reading, “Christianity” names a collective identity, not a set of doctrinal commitments. But “religion”—as deployed in these endeavors—is not simply a sociological category: if not about “belief” per se, it is implicated nevertheless in political-theological debates about authority, sovereignty, and the sacred. Indeed, I suspect that questions of the latter type have been neglected in the academic literature partly because the latter’s secular frame tends to reinforce a normative distinction between genuine or authentic religion, on the one hand, and politics, on the other. The subtitle of Saving the People—How Populists Hijack Religion—implies that real religion is not political, and that its political “uses” are merely strategic. By contrast, I regard such a distinction as itself ideological—as representing a normative move within a political-theological game from which it is difficult to achieve exteriority.

Categories and Methods

Here I would like to put forward a methodological proposal: that instead of approaching religion, politics and race, etc., as analytically distinct phenomena that happen to have become entangled, and which it is the task of the scholar to distinguish, we conceive the object of our

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inquiry as an undifferentiated whole. That is, I propose to follow Foucault in not treating universal categories as an a priori grid of intelligibility, but as historical artifacts. Commenting in his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics* on his approach to the history of how governmental practice has come to be organized and understood, Foucault writes, “I start from the theoretical and methodological decision that consists in saying: Let’s suppose that universals do not exist. And then I put the question to history and historians: How can you write history if you do not accept a priori the existence of things like the state, society, the sovereign, and subjects?” Rather than taking these “universal” as given, as comprising “an obligatory grid of intelligibility for certain concrete practices,” Foucault’s strategy – which might be called *methodological nominalism* – invites us to appreciate their historical contingency. By performing an *epoché* – a suspension of essentializing assumptions about social ontology – we can come to view otherwise familiar categories of analysis as themselves comprising appropriate objects of historical inquiry and critique. Analogously, I strive to suspend the assumptions, e.g., that religion has an essence distinct from that of politics, and that what is called “race” is only externally and contingently entangled with what is called “Christianity.” The question is not, how did religion, politics, and race, etc. become entangled, but, why do certain parties wish to distinguish them? What is at stake, for example, in the claim that right-wing populists in Germany or the United States are “perverting” Christianity? To the extent that speaking of “religion” is a way of *not speaking* about “race,” “politics,” “gender,” etc., it is, I want to insist, important to recognize that what these various categories attempt to foreground is implicated from the outset.

In contemporary political commentary, the term “populism” is often used pejoratively to denote a narrow, homogeneous conception of “the people” – one constructed over against both outsiders and “elites.” *Populism* is, according to this usage, what we call it when we don’t like what we see in democracy’s mirror. Yet historically the term has been self-applied by diverse figures and movement on the right, left, and center of the political spectrum, including, just a few


4 Foucault, 2-3.
years ago, by Barack Obama. Most basically, a populist is someone who speaks on behalf of the people. Conceived broadly, I want to suggest, we are all populists — engaged, whether or not we recognize it, in the construction of “the people.” To reject any particular conception of the people is necessarily to endorse, at least tacitly, another. Neither “religion” nor “the people” is a politically neutral, descriptive term, and attempts to isolate the genuine article in its purity — whether by “populists” or by the scholars who study them — are always already political.

To say that we are all populists is also to imply that “populism” is of limited value as a political classification, and that we need more substantive descriptors. Accounts of populism that frame it in purely structural terms — e.g., as anti-elitist, as concerned with the interests of the people, or as a politics of fear — are too formal and ahistorical to be of use in capturing the salient features of, e.g., the Trump phenomenon or the appeal of Hugo Chávez. Moreover, they invite dubious groupings and a false sense of equivalence. Finally, as I shall argue here, even among movements that share substantive features, there are often important differences, and movements are themselves rarely internally consistent. Attending to the nuances of these movements is arguably of greater value than categorizing them in terms of purely formal similarities.

When it comes to religion, what is commonly called “populism” takes various forms. In the United States, the “elites” against whom “the people” are positioned are of multiple stripes — Washington insiders, Hollywood types, liberal academics — but they tend to be portrayed as secular in the sense of lacking in religious commitment, and as hostile to those forms of religion that make truth claims, particularly evangelical Christianity. Islam is opposed to “the people” not because it is not secular, but because it is not Christian, i.e., because it makes a rival claim to truth. In other cases, however, “secularity” is regarded not as a problem to be overcome but as a legacy to be defended, and Muslims are deemed unassimilable precisely because they are said

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6 Claims to identity, on the other hand, can more easily be accommodated by elite pluralist frameworks.
to reject secular law and liberal values. Movements of the former kind might be thought more religious than movements of the latter type, but I shall argue that it is not so simple: the more avowedly theological movements – according to which Christianity is a “relationship” or faith claim – quickly become entangled in the secular, whereas apparently more secular approaches to religion – often couched in terms of cultural heritage and tradition – are often crypto-theological. Claims to truth are flattened into claims to identity, but claims to identity sometimes mask claims to truth. While movements of both types are present in various contexts, the former seem to be more prominent in the United States and the U.K., whereas the latter appear to be more common in other parts of Europe, including Germany. While it is tempting to view this distinction as tracking a Protestant-Catholic divide, the reality is more complicated – a product partly of different secular settlements – and both projects are best viewed as idealized types, with considerable circulation of ideas complicating any hard-and-fast distinction.

The Paradox of Popular Sovereignty

Consider, if you will, a familiar, if paradoxical, image: “Drawing Hands,” a well-known 1948 lithograph by M.C. Escher, depicts two hands emerging, in tromp l’oeil fashion, from a sheet of paper, each drawing the other into existence. Douglas Hofstadter describes the image as a (representation of a) strange loop – i.e., “not a physical circuit but an abstract loop in which . . . there is a shift from one level of abstraction (or structure) to another, which feels like an upwards movement in a hierarchy, and yet somehow the successive ‘upward’ shifts turn out to give rise to a closed cycle.” 7 It is just such a strange loop that we find at work in the founding documents of the American republic with their references to “the people.”

As Jacques Derrida once noted with reference to the American Declaration of Independence, “this people does not exist.

They do not exist as an entity, it does not exist, before this declaration, not as such. If it gives birth to itself, as free and independent subject, as possible signer, this can hold only in the act of the signature. The signature invents the signer. The

signer can only authorize him- or herself to sign once he or she has come to the end [parvenu au vout], if one can say this, of his or her own signature, in a sort of fabulous retroactivity. By speaking in the name of a community yet to be imagined as such, the Declaration invents the very “people” its signatories claim to represent. Like Escher’s hands, the American people is imagined to have inscribed itself into existence by a sovereign act of will. The Declaration enacts, illocutionarily, the investiture of a popular sovereign.

This idea of a self-authorizing people is in one sense little more than a comforting and mystifying myth – on a par with the Athenian idea that an autochthonous polis had sprung, cicada-like, from the Attican soil. It imagines America as a self-contained whole, created ex nihilo on an empty continent, without taking into account the history of colonialism, genocide, and slavery. At the time of the founding, twenty percent of the population lived in bondage, and Thomas Jefferson, who penned the Declaration’s famous line about all men having been created equal, enslaved more than 600 people over the course of his life. Like all sovereign bodies, “the people” on which the founding documents rest their claim to authority – and to which they give birth – was characterized principally by whom it excluded. The American body politic has never been an abstract, purely formal category, but a body of a particular kind, masculine, Christened, and distinguished historically, above all, by its ontological whiteness. “America never was America to me,” Langston Hughes wrote. Insofar as it pretends to locate authority in a sovereign unit that cannot account for itself democratically, the myth of popular sovereignty builds its conclusion into its premises.

Precisely in its mythological character, however, the Declaration’s performance of sovereignty points to an interesting set of anxieties about legitimacy. Derrida writes: “There was no signer, by right, before the text of the Declaration which itself remains the producer and guarantor of its own signature. . . . It opens for itself a line of credit, its own credit, for itself to itself.” In this way, the Founders’ “we” can be read as performative, rather than constative: its

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9 Derrida., 27.
referent is not an already existing entity, but an entity in the act of constructing and legitimating itself, a not-yet-fully present referent.\(^{10}\)

The result is a paradox at the heart of the democratic enterprise: on the one hand, democracy is possible only when there is a demos, and constituting a demos in a context of multiple sovereign states, inevitably produces exclusions.\(^{11}\) In other words, citizenship requires that we distinguish insiders from outsiders, and the democratic struggle among citizens to be treated equally to one another is almost always, in effect, a quest to be treated differently from those outside the polity. As the anthropologist Talal Asad has noted:

> The democratized ethical subject is first and foremost a loyal citizen, and thus a member of liberal democracy’s privileged circle of ‘we.’ The benefits provided by the welfare state to the citizen – security against destitution, minimum wages, education and health care benefits, retirement pensions and so on – are confined to this circle of ‘we.’ Ideologically, at least, the citizen is expected to die for his or her homeland. In return, the subject expects equal treatment from the liberal democratic state of which he or she is a citizen. These reciprocal bonds inevitably construct an ‘outside’ to the circle: a world of aliens not entitled to benefits and enemy aliens not entitled to sympathy.\(^{12}\)

The political equality of citizens is not the moral equality posited by human rights; indeed, the two are often in conflict. On the other hand, there is no *democratic* way of distinguishing between insiders and outsiders, of determining, from *within* the procedures that democracy authorizes, who belongs and who does not. The question of who is eligible to vote, for example, cannot be decided, but only begged, by a vote. In short, democracy, as practiced within the boundaries of

\(^{10}\) See Derrida, 25.

\(^{11}\) Anything resembling an actual “global democracy” or “world governance” would arguably produce exclusions of its own -- e.g., of those deemed incompetent, under-age, non-human, etc.

sovereign states, seems both to demand and to resist closure: the logic of state sovereignty requires exclusions, but no particular exclusion can be justified democratically. The sovereign people on which the legitimacy of the everything else depends is not itself democratically legitimate. As a consequence, the moral borders of a democratic state are inherently fuzzy and contestable, always provisional and subject to being redrawn.

The logic of popular sovereignty – the idea that democratic government depends for its legitimacy on the will of the people – is circular: the people said to authorize the state is constructed and maintained by the state. What matters, in other words, are not people conceived in the plural, but the people: the sovereign people comprises a singular, enduring entity, and the question is who belongs to this entity. Individuals matter distributively only insofar as they are citizens, members of the collective. The quotation by Stanley Cavell at the beginning of this essay points to the performativity – the theater – through which the United States came to be constituted. There was no “America” – no sovereign unit on which the United States could rest its claim to legitimacy – prior to this performance. In this respect, Cavell seems to suggest, the United States is different from “France” or “England.” But in fact all democratic nation-states are implicated in a similar circularity. Part of the explanation for why the paradox of popular sovereignty – the inability of giving a fully democratic account of the demos – tends to escape notice in the latter cases is that most modern constitutional states emerged not through revolutionary acts of self-assertion but through the democratizing of non-democratic regimes. In the process, subjects became citizens, but pre-existing boundaries of belonging were simply taken as given. These boundaries cannot themselves be authorized democratically – by appeal to the sovereign people – without begging the question of which people are here relevant.

One implication of this paradox endemic to popular sovereignty is that the popular sovereign presents a standing question to itself: Who are “We the people?” To this question, various answers can be given, including those characteristic of “populism,” as this is commonly

13 Carl Schmitt emphasized the first horn of this dilemma to the neglect of the second. Referring to Schmitt’s famous distinction between “friends” and “enemies,” Derrida has noted, that “at every point when this border is threatened, fragile, porous, contestable . . . the Schmittian discourse collapses. It is against the threat of this ruin that his discourse takes form.” Jacques Derrida, Politics of Friendship, trans. George Collins (New York: Verso, 1997), 88.
understood today. Indeed, populism is, at its most basic, simply the claim to speak on behalf of the people. Because democracy requires a “we,” there is a sense in which populism is unavoidable: every democratic system presupposes, and must occasionally attempt to articulate and reaffirm, certain boundaries. Moreover, for the reasons just noted, no answer to this question can itself be authorized democratically. Consequently, the most basic political question in a democracy – the question on which all other political questions turn – is a question democracy cannot easily answer: the question of who belongs to the popular sovereign.

A Political Theology of “the People”

In times of perceived crisis, when sovereignty is taken to be under threat, there may be significant pressure to shore up “the people” – to harden its boundaries and anchor it in something immutable – and this demand is met – if never actually satisfied – by answers that attempt to break the strange loop of self-authorization. Indeed, such a move can be detected in the Declaration of Independence, which begins by averring self-evident truths and concludes its performance of self-authorship by “appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions.” In this way, Derrida argues, the signers present themselves as co-signers:

It is still “in the name of” that the “good people” of America call themselves and declare themselves independent, at the instant in which they invent (for) themselves a signing identity. They sign in the name of the laws of nature and in the name of God. They pose or posit their institutional laws on the foundation of natural laws and by the same coup (the interpretive coup of force) in the name of God, creator of nature. He comes, in effect, to guarantee the rectitude of popular intentions, the unity and goodness of the people.14

On Derrida’s reading, these invocations of self-evidence, of “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God,” represent the Founders’ attempts, however oblique, to escape the vicious circle of self-authorization by anchoring the legitimacy of the new polity in something constative rather than

performatively, something stable, “given,” and enduring. As Derrida puts it, “for this Declaration to have a meaning and an effect, there must be a last instance. God is the name, the best one, for this last instance and this ultimate signature.”

“God” is here Derrida’s term of art for whatever is said to arrest the performatively inherent in constituting a demos – to fund the promises on which, according to Locke, social contracting depends – be it Providence, Nature, History, Race, Volk, Heimat, or any of the other putative constatives that have lent an aura of necessity and immutability to contingent political arrangements. These various (seemingly) extra-systemic “guarantees” serve to conceal and/or justify the violence required to institute and maintain the polity and to reify the distinction between insiders and outsiders.

The German Alternative

Although all democratic nation-states depend on extra-democratic accounts of the demos, the situation in the United States is, of course, different in a number of important ways from that in Europe. Indeed, it is not entirely clear what the appropriate units of comparison should be: ought the United States be compared to one or another European country, like Germany or the Netherlands? Or ought it be compared with “Europe” or the E.U.? This question

15 Ibid., 28-9. In On Revolution, Hannah Arendt raises this same issue in terms borrowed from Rousseau: “The great problem in politics, which I compare to the problem of squaring the circle in geometry . . . [is]: How to find a form of government which puts the law above man.’ Theoretically, Rousseau’s problem closely resembles Sieyes’s vicious circle: those who get together to constitute a new government are themselves unconstitutional, that is, they have no authority to do what they have set out to achieve. The vicious circle in legislating is present not in ordinary lawmaking, but in laying down the fundamental law, the law of the land or the constitution which, from then on, is supposed to incarnate the “higher law” from which all laws ultimately derive their authority. And with this problem, which appeared as the urgent need for some absolute, the men of the American Revolution found themselves no less confronted than their colleagues in France. The trouble was -- to quote Rousseau once more -- that to put the law above man and thus to establish the validity of man-made laws, il faudrait des dieux, ‘one actually would need gods.’” Hannah Arendt, On Revolution (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 183-4. For an illuminating comparison and analysis of Arendt and Derrida on the Declaration of Independence, see B. Honig, “Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic,” American Political Science Review 85:1 (March 1991): 97-113.
is further complicated by the fact that “Europe” is itself an ambivalent concept in some of these same discourses – naming, on the one hand, a civilizational identity imagined to be shared by people from various nations, and, on the other hand, an administrative apparatus – run by bureaucrats in Brussels – viewed as posing a threat to national sovereignty and permitting the migratory flows said to dilute and pollute Europe’s civilizational identity. For example, the 2017 manifesto of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party – currently Germany’s largest opposition party – decries “the relinquishing of national sovereignty to the EU.”\(^\text{16}\)

This ambivalence is related to the double threat noted earlier: identity and sovereignty are imagined to be under attack from both above/within and below/without. The AfD manifesto presents the party as engaged in a struggle for German sovereignty which draws inspiration from revolutionary sources: “The recollection of the two revolutions of 1848 and 1989 drive our civil protest and the determination to complete our national unity in freedom, and create a Europe of sovereign and democratic nation states, united in peace, self-determination and good-neighbourliness.”\(^\text{17}\) This vision of Europe – a Europe of “sovereign, but loosely connected nation states” – is threatened, from above, by trans-national institutions: “At the latest since the Schengen (1985), Maastricht (1992) and Lisbon (2007) Treaties, the inviolability of national sovereignty as the foundation of our state has been exposed as a fiction.”\(^\text{18}\) Having been deprived of the ability to control their borders and limit free movement, these nation states are, moreover, threatened by

\(^\text{16}\) Alternative für Deutschland, *Manifesto for Germany: The Political Programme of the Alternative for Germany* (2017), 8: [https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2017/04/2017-04-12_afd-grundsatzprogramm-englisch_web.pdf](https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2017/04/2017-04-12_afd-grundsatzprogramm-englisch_web.pdf) Accessed May 12, 2018. It adds: “We oppose the idea to transform the European Union into a centralized federal state. We are in favour of returning the European Union to an economic union based on shared interests, and consisting of sovereign, but loosely connected nation states” (15). That the manifesto, which stresses “the German language as focal point of our identity,” is available on the party’s website in six languages, attests to the international circulation of nationalist discourses – a phenomenon abetted by what, paraphrasing Benedict Anderson, might be termed *digital capitalism.*

\(^\text{17}\) *Manifesto for Germany,* 5.

\(^\text{18}\) *Manifesto for Germany,* 7.
migration, and in particular by Muslims. Reclaiming political sovereignty is thus a project with an explicitly religious dimension.

“Europe” is popularly imagined to be more “secular” than the United States, but it is notable that discourses about religion remain prominent in both contexts, even if they differ in interesting ways. Earlier I distinguished between movements in which the “good people” are seen as having true faith, and as in conflict with those who lack it, and conceptions of the people that treat Christianity more as an historical source or reservoir of civic identity. Movements of the first type can themselves take more than one form, ranging from “moral majority”-style campaigns, like that pioneered by Jerry Falwell, Sr., to Christianize the state, on the one hand, to minority-rights approaches that represent Christianity as a beleaguered identity in need of special protections, on the other. Often these two strategies co-exist uneasily and alternate depending on the context. In the United States, for example, conservative groups have been influential both in securing religious exemptions in the courts and in influencing the nomination and appointment of judges. What both strategies have in common is a conception of the state as at least potentially in competition with Christianity. Such efforts are commonly represented as attempting to push back against secularity – whether by evangelizing the public sphere or by carving out protected spaces within it – but they are also entangled in its technologies. In the process of attempting to shore up Christian identity, influence, and privilege, Christianity comes to be treated as a “religion” – in competition with other religions, like “Islam,” and with the non-religious, secular world. It names, on this construal, an identity in a multi-cultural market and, like the identities with which it finds itself in competition, is viewed as deserving of rights-based protections. In this way, the rhetoric of minority rights is appropriated in defense of comparatively privileged identities.

The use of rights claims to defend the very identities whose hegemony such claims are often conceived of as guarding against is of course not unique to religion. Another obvious example is provided by the white identity politics with which Christian identity politics is in many cases intertwined. Indeed, it might be argued that rights claims – in their formality and indifference to normative questions about the good – lend themselves to precisely this sort of reciprocal, lateral deployment. The appropriation of the rhetoric of religious rights, however,
presents an especially interesting set of quandaries, because “religion” is a secular category. Although I lack the space to explore this here, I have argued elsewhere that secularity is best conceived not as the inverse of religion but as an *episteme* – an ensemble of dispositions, affects, and ethical intuitions that structures knowledge.\(^{19}\) Within the secular episteme, religion emerges into view as a limited and discrete domain, an object variously of interest, anxiety, regulation, and academic study. The ambivalence of appropriating religious freedom has recently been explored in relation to minority and non-Western groups, who often find themselves obliged to submit to the Procrustean contours of Protestant Christianity.\(^{20}\) But “religion” can sometimes be an awkward fit for Protestant majorities. Historically, American evangelicals have often rejected the claim that Christianity is a religion – both because Dialectic theologians had tended to view “religion” as an anthropological phenomenon, and because of an unwillingness to accept for Christianity the relativized status of one “option” among others in a secular, pluralist framework.

Insofar as they appropriate the concept of religion and the discourse of religious freedom, contemporary evangelicals in the United States find themselves on a secular playing field, struggling to repackage emic understandings in deflationary secular categories. Moreover, by petitioning the state for legal relief, they defer to its authority: sovereign is that which grants the exemptions.

The second type of movement alluded to a moment ago starts from an already secularized conception of Christianity as identity, but here the identity is not individual or characteristic of an internal minority but national or civilizational: Christianity is conceived as a cultural marker, and the competition is not so much with other identities in a pluralist society, but with other societies or civilizations. Instead of presupposing a multi-cultural milieu, within which Christianity

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is seen as a besieged minority, movements of this latter type reject multi-culturalism altogether. A distinctive feature of this constellation of movements is that secularity tends to be embraced as consistent with Christianity, rather than being viewed as in competition with it. According to its manifesto:

The AfD is committed to German as the predominant culture (*Leitkultur*). This culture is derived from three sources: firstly, the religious traditions of Christianity; secondly, the scientific and humanistic heritage, whose ancient roots were renewed during the period of Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment; and thirdly, Roman law, upon which our constitutional state is founded.21 Whereas American evangelical populists like Falwell tend to view Christianity as under threat from the “scientific and humanistic heritage” of the Enlightenment, the AfD sees these “sources” as compatible.

Are the latter appeals to Christianity sincerely *religious* or merely strategic? As Marzouki and McDonnell note, so-called right-wing populists in Europe often come into conflict with established churches, whose leaders they tend to perceive as “elites” in a pejorative sense.22 For example, the AfD has been sharply criticized by representatives of both the Protestant and Catholic state churches in Germany, who have accused it of perverting Christianity. It is consequently tempting to view populist appeals to Christianity as entirely negative: as Olivier Roy puts it, “the European right advocates a Christian identity for Europe not because it wants to promote Christianity, but because it wants to fight Islam and the increased presence within European societies of Muslims.”23 However, these tensions are, I argue, better interpreted as a theological contest for control of the meaning of Christianity itself.

While viewed from a largely secular standpoint, Christianity continues to be treated by right-wing critics of the German church leadership as a source of authority with a normative

21 *Manifesto for Germany*, 46.

22 Marzouki and McDonnell, 8.

23 Olivier Roy, “Beyond Populism: The Conservative Right, the Courts, the Churches and the Concept of a Christian Europe,” in *Saving the People*, 197.
status altogether different from that assigned Islam. Concealed within the appeal to identity is a claim to truth, which is revealed when it is perceived to come into conflict with rival claims to political authority or “true religion,” on the part both of church elites and of Muslims. For the AfD, assertions of Germany’s so-called Christian heritage are simultaneously assertions of national sovereignty: a “sovereign Germany” requires the subordination of claims to religious authority outside the scope of Christianity.\(^\text{24}\) Thus, while it makes no corresponding claim about Christian theologians in German universities, the AfD manifesto insists that “[t]heological chairs for Islam studies at German universities are to be abolished and the positions transferred to the faculty of non-denominational religious studies.”\(^\text{25}\) That is to say, while Christian theology may continue to be taught in public universities, Islam can only be taught about.

Islam, on this account, is incompatible with German nationhood not simply because it represents a cultural “other,” but because it is perceived as making a claim to sovereignty at the same level as – and potentially rivaling – the claim made by the German state. According to the manifesto, “An Islam which neither respects nor refrains from being in conflict with our legal system, or that even lays claims to power as the only true religion, is incompatible with our legal system and our culture.”\(^\text{26}\) Thus, Islam is sometimes portrayed not as a “religion” at all, but as a political movement. For example, in 2016, Alexander Gauland, then floor leader for the AfD in the Brandenburg state parliament and deputy party leader (and currently the AfD leader in the Bundestag), was quoted in the Frankfurter Allgemeine as saying, “Islam is not a religion like Catholic or Protestant Christianity but rather always associated intellectually with the take-over of the state. For this reason, the Islamicization of Germany is a threat.”\(^\text{27}\) But one might also detect in this claim that Islam is “not a religion” political-theological anxieties about the

\(^{24}\) See Manifesto for Germany, 5.

\(^{25}\) Manifesto for Germany, 49.

\(^{26}\) Manifesto for Germany, 48.

sovereignty of a state that has long since coopted the authority of its established churches as a constituent feature of its self-understanding as secular. Germany is secular *because* it is Christian, and for this reason “Islam does not belong to Germany.”28 Because secular-Christian Europe is tolerant, it cannot tolerate Islam.29

On this view, Christianity is permissible not because it is non-political per se, but – on the contrary – because it is regarded as a submerged source of the state’s political authority. It appears non-political only because its politics are imagined to align with the political structure of the state, as both are idealized by the AfD. Unlike in the case of “moral majority” evangelicals in the United States, there is no need to wrest control of the state from secularists, because Christianity and secularity are not viewed as rivals.30

“Religion” as a Secular Category

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd has distinguished two forms of secularity – laicism and what she calls “Judeo-Christian secularism.” Where the former advocates for strict separation between religion and politics, the latter “emphasizes the role of Christianity, and more recently Judeo-

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28 *Manifesto for Germany*, 48.

29 It is significant that discourse about Jews also circulates within right-wing movements in both the United States and Germany and intersects with language about Muslims and Christians in complex ways. A full treatment of this topic exceeds the scope of this essay, but two features of this discourse can be noted briefly. First, whereas Muslims tend to be presented as a threat from outside or below, when Jews are represented as a threat, they tend to be framed as a threat from within or above – i.e., as an “elite” threat to “the people.” And secondly, it is important to note that anti-Semitism coexists alongside philo-Semitism, and that the latter provides cover for anti-Islamicism. Antipathy to Muslims is thus justified on the basis of the claim that Islam is anti-Jewish, or that Muslims are hostile to Israel. Through the invention of a “Judeo-Christian tradition” to which Islam is said to be antagonistic, Muslims are made the scapegoat for a long history of Christian and European anti-Semitism. This second feature of discourse about Jews and Muslims is not unique to the right-wing movements discussed in this essay.

30 It is worth noting, however, that in response to criticism from church leaders, the AfD has emphasized the separation of church and state and the freedom of Christian conscience. See AfD-Fraktion im Landtag Rheinland-Pfalz, *Kirchenpolitisches Manifest*, September 7, 2017: [http://wwwafd-rlp-fraktion.de/kommentare/kirchenpolitisches-manifest](http://wwwafd-rlp-fraktion.de/kommentare/kirchenpolitisches-manifest)
Christianity, as the foundation for secular public order and democratic political institutions.”31 The AfD manifesto situates itself within the tradition of Judeo-Christian secularism – even using the term “Judeo-Christian,” without apparent irony, to describe Germany’s cultural heritage.32 The erosion of Christian identity is troubling, on this view, because it signals the erosion of state sovereignty.

The question of how to characterize American movements like that of Jerry Falwell, Jr., is more complicated. Although American courts take a broadly accommodationist approach to religion, in contrast with French-style laicite, Falwell and figures on the evangelical right in the U.S. would appear to view the state with considerable ambivalence and suspicion. While touting America’s ostensibly Christian foundations, they tend to view the state as having fallen from grace (needing to be redeemed or “made great again”) and thus as at least potentially hostile to Christianity: the state belongs to “the world.” Unlike in the case of the AfD, Christianity is not viewed as coterminous with secularity. Indeed, the two are seen as in zero-sum competition. Whether hoping eventually to (re-)Christianize the state via a moral majority or (in the meantime) to claim religious exemptions from its sovereign authority, they take for granted a conceptual separation of church and state.

But by adopting a secular, broadly liberal descriptive account of their relation to the state, these movements find themselves entangled, paradoxically, in the secular episteme they claim to reject. Indeed, the very idea that the United States has abandoned its Christian heritage – if such a thing ever existed – seems to read history through the lens of a secular, liberal set of categories, as though whatever changes have occurred were primarily demographic and not conceptual – i.e., as though the interesting difference between a supposedly Christian past and an ostensibly secular present were the extent and political influence of the group of people for whom Christianity is an identity, when in fact this whole idea of a Christian identity as one among others internal to American life only makes sense from a contemporary pluralist vantage point.


32 Manifesto for Germany, 47.
It is precisely this conception of “religion” (and of Christianity as religion) – and not religion’s supposedly having lost ground – that is, I would argue, the defining element of the secular.

This latter idea of Christianity as identity is also central to the discourse of right-wing European “populist” movements, including the AfD, although here it tends to be deployed differently – not as in competition with the state but as its basis. Thus, where right-wing evangelicals in the U.S. imagine themselves to be fighting a two-front battle against secularity and Islam, groups like the AfD seem to see Christianity and secularity not as antagonists, but as coterminous, or as parent and child. Indeed, the problem with Islam, on this view, is not that it is a religion, but that it is a politics. The quarrel for European populists is not with secularists, but with church elites over the meaning of Christianity. While the latter might naturally view this as a matter of Christianity having been perverted or “hijacked,” I would suggest that that characterization is, from a descriptive standpoint, tendentious.

The deployments of religion I’ve attempted briefly to describe here are characteristically secular, but they cannot for that reason be dismissed as instances of religion being manipulated for independent political purposes. On the contrary, “religion” is a secular category, inextricably implicated in the theo-politics of modernity. In response to anxieties about sovereignty, claims to truth are repackaged as claims to identity, while claims to religious identity can give expression to claims to political truth. How one thinks about religion will depend on how one conceives of the people, and vice versa.

**Conclusion: Performing Differently**

I noted earlier that the paradox of popular sovereignty – the performativity involved in appeals to “the people” – generates a demand for constatives, for extra-democratic “guarantees.” These givens, which Derrida calls “gods,” are imagined to ground the performance from outside it. Appeals to God, however, are themselves part of the performance, and so cannot finally break the strange loop of self-authorization. Consider, for instance, the opening words of the Declaration: “We hold these truths to be self-evident...” As Hannah Arendt famously observed, self-evident truths do not need to be stated. That Jefferson begins the sentence with “We hold” suggests that it is the holding, rather than the purported self-evidence, that is doing
the work. We the people depend upon gods, but the gods are of our own imagining. Sylvia Wynter captures this dynamic when she observes:

> [A]s humans, we cannot/do not preexist our cosmogonies, our representations of our origins – even though it is we ourselves who invent those cosmogonies and then retroactively project them onto a past. We invent them in formulaic storytelling terms, as “donor figures” or “entities,” who have extrahumanly (supernaturally, but now also naturally and/or bioevolutionarily, therefore secularly) mandated what the structuring societal order of our genre-specific, eusocial or cultural present would have to be.\(^{33}\)

The jealous, territorial deities of civil religion are reverse-engineered to underwrite the prevailing social order. But because they are of our own making – because their authority is identical to that of the community they are invoked to justify – they cannot finally satisfy the demand for justification without begging the question.

Sovereignty is a theological category, and as long as there are states, there will be gods. But the gods can be imagined in new ways, and “the people” performed differently. The same performativity that creates the demand for constatives – God, whiteness, etc. – holds open the possibility of alternative, more expansive performances of peoplehood.

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