Message of hate: an illuminated cross with a sticker reading “refugees not welcome” at a 2016 Pegida march close to the Frauenkirche, Dresden.
In front of secular Dresden’s baroque Frauenkirche, a large crowd has gathered. Many are carrying oversized crosses; others candles. Occasionally Christmas carols and church hymns are intoned. A few hundred kilometres to the west, in Paris, the former capital of laïcité (secularism), thousands of people rally in veneration of a Catholic saint, while in Milan a speaker addresses supporters as “apostles” and swears on the Bible to “put the gospel into action”. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, a Florida pastor bears witness to what he calls “a deeply religious experience”, as several thousand activists begin their gathering by reciting the Lord’s prayer and singing “God bless the USA”.

What’s remarkable about these events is that none of them occurred during any kind of religious service or gathering. Instead, they were organised by right-wing populist movements: the first happened during a demonstration by the “Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident” (Pegida) in Dresden, the second during the annual commemoration march for Joan of Arc by the Front National in Paris, the third at a campaign speech of the Lega leader Matteo Salvani in Milan, and the fourth during a Donald Trump rally.

These events are symptomatic of two broader trends taking hold in many western democracies: first, the rise of right-wing populism, and second, the resurgence of religion, which – over a century after Nietzsche declared that “God is dead” – is again fundamentally reshaping politics.

Both trends are often seen as part of a wider cultural backlash against new waves of immigration and against social liberalisation. It is tempting to interpret episodes such as those seen in Dresden, Paris, Milan and Florida as indicators of an approaching “clash of civilisations”, or a new culture war between Christianity, Islam and secularism. The populist right encourages such conclusions through its rhetoric, claiming to be the last fortress of the Christian Occident against the onslaught of Islam and godless liberalism.

However, the relationship between right-wing populism and religion is more complicated than that. Although 81 per cent of white evangelical voters backed Trump, a 2016 Pew Center survey revealed that he was also considered the least religious GOP candidate in recent history. In a letter published during the primaries in October 2016, Trump received significant opposition from parts of the otherwise staunchly Republican evangelical clergy, accusing him of “bigotry” and “racism”. In fact, the same pastor who attended the Florida rally, Joel Tooley, later stated that a “demonic activity was palpable” at the event, triggering another rift between evangelical clergy and Trumpism.

Right-wing populists are styling themselves as protectors of Christianity while revolting against immigration and “the liberalism of the rich”. How did religion become the latest fault-line in the West’s new identity politics?

By Tobias Cremer
Similarly, in Europe, in spite of the aggressive use of religious themes by far-right movements, polls show that their supporters are actually disproportionately irreligious, and that church attendance is one of the strongest statistical predictors for voting against the populist radical right. Church officials have also spoken out against the new right; some, like the former president of the Lutheran world federation, Bishop Christian Krause, going as far as to call their use of religious symbols “perverse”.

Historically, in Western democracies, the two defining social divides have been the economic one between workers and capitalists, and the religious or cultural one between social conservatism and social liberalism. As a result, for most of the 20th century the West’s politics was dominated by questions about economic redistribution, taxation and class relations, as well as social issues such as abortion, church-state relations and sexual freedom.

Over the last few years, however, polls suggest that concerns about immigration, culture or national identity increasingly outrank economic, social or moral issues. In the UK, a 2017 study from researchers at the universities of Kent and Nottingham has shown that immigration was by far the most important motive for pro-Brexit voters in the EU referendum. Exit polls in Germany also revealed that “refugees and foreigners” were voters’ chief concern in the September 2017 federal election, which resulted in the far-right Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) becoming the official opposition in the Bundestag. Similarly – and defying conventional wisdom about an economic revolt by the Rust Belt or a religious rebellion of the Bible Belt – surveys by the Pew Center showed that Trump voters were neither primarily concerned about their personal economic situation, nor about social issues such as abortion. Instead, what they cared about most was “immigration”, “respect” and “race relations”.

While these priorities may seem unexpected and sudden, they have long roots. For example, according to YouGov, for several years over half of British people have agreed with the statement: “Britain has changed in recent times beyond recognition and sometimes feels like a foreign country and this makes me feel uncomfortable”. In the US, “globalists”, or “communitarianism” and “cosmopolitanism”.

Traditional party systems are ill-equipped to deal with this new political fault-line. In the early months of her premiership, Theresa May tried to pick up on some of the nationalist sentiment by attacking the “global elite” as “citizens of nowhere”, an effort that was largely ridiculed. On the left, the “third way” advocated by Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder and Bill Clinton in the 1990s substituted the communitarian instincts of old working-class parties with what the American author Thomas Frank calls “the liberalisation of the rich”, emphasising secondary education, gender equality, minority rights and environmentalism rather than class solidarity. On the right, a traditional emphasis on patriotism and national identity has been replaced by a cosmopolitan and socially liberal conservatism, incarnated by figures such as Angela Merkel or George Osborne before he left politics.

Like the identity politics of the left, the new “white identity politics” is primarily concerned with predefined traits such as race, culture, sexuality or gender. But it reverses the roles by claiming to defend the rights of the ethnic majority rather than of minorities. These new identity politics seem to replace not only class politics but also religiously motivated “culture wars”. But Western right-wing populists are using Christianity as a new identity marker between “us” and “them” – while remaining distanced from Christian values and beliefs in practice.

In their book Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion the political scientists Olivier Roy, Nadia Marzouki and Duncan McDonnell argue that at the core of right-wing populism lies “the claim that the homogeneous ‘good’ people are suffering due to actions from above by elites and from below by a variety of ‘others’”. These “others” are increasingly defined in religious terms. As the American sociologist José Casanova observes, “Only a few decades ago, immigrants from Turkey in Germany were viewed as Turks and not as Muslims, immigrants from Pakistan in the UK were viewed as Pakistanis and not as Muslims… But today throughout Europe immigrants from Muslim countries not only are primarily classified as Muslims, but they have come to represent ‘Islam’ with all the baggage.”

Given this religious definition of the “other”, Christianity must be the cultural identifier of “us”. Yet, instead of following church teachings on public policy, such as on welcoming strangers, the new right-wing populists often marry religious language, symbols and rituals with predominately secular policies.

The French FN’s veneration of the Catholic saint Joan of Arc, in spite of its anti-clerical positions on laïcité, is one example of this. Pegida’s carrying of crosses in secular Dresden or Geert Wilders’s increased reference to the Netherlands’ Judeo-Christian culture, while defying Christian teachings on topics from refugees to gay marriage, are other cases in point.

Even a twice-divorced and thrice-married formerly pro-choice real estate tycoon with little exhibited biblical knowledge (but several extramarital affairs) can become the saviour of “Christian America” – if the term “Christian” is not defined through personal piety, but as an identifier against anything not traditionally American. In truth, right-wing populists’ policies are often

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“Only a few decades ago, immigrants from Pakistan in the UK were viewed as Pakistani and not as Muslims”
“Christian” only to the extent that they are “anti-Islam”.

In this sense, the use of religion by the new right in the US and western Europe is different from the religious populism we see in eastern Europe, or among some mainstream conservative politicians in the West. Poland and Hungary’s right-wing leaders, Jarosław Kaczyński and Viktor Orbán, claim to defend Poland’s status as a “bulwark of Christianity”, and the soul of “Christian Europe” respectively. As Orbán has put it: “Twenty-seven years ago here in central Europe, we believed that Europe was our future; today we feel that we are the future of Europe.”

Elsewhere, in western Europe, other conservatives such as François Fillon, the former prime minister and Republican presidential candidate in France, or Jacob Rees-Mogg, openly emphasise the role of their personal religiosity in their populist politics. Rees-Mogg claims to take his whip “from the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church rather than the Whip’s Office”.

But these references to religion are different from those of Trump, Le Pen, Wilders and Co, because Kaczyński and Rees-Mogg appear to be genuinely guided by some of the social teaching of the church. They are religious populists rather than populists hijacking religion, and their policies are often endorsed by church authorities and enjoy substantial support among religious voters.

By contrast, polls and studies show that the strategy of secular populist leaders to hijack religion is most successful among irreligious voters, whereas practising Christians remain comparatively immune to its appeal. In Germany, for instance, AfD scores about twice as high among the irreligious than with Protestants or Catholics. The FN in France and the Lega in Italy have traditionally underperformed among Catholics and tend to do even worse among regular churchgoers. In the US the picture is slightly more complicated, because Trump proved popular with white evangelical Christians in 2016. Yet he too performed significantly better among non-practising evangelicals than frequent churchgoers.

In Germany both Pegida and the AfD had initially sought to appeal to conservative Christians. Yet as anti-immigration policies remained at the core of these movements, the German churches came out strongly against them and their use of “Christian” themes. Through measures ranging from public condemnations of far-right “hate speech” and the turning off of cathedral lights in the background of demonstrations, to the exclusion of AfD activists from church positions, the German churches became robust opponents of the new right. The right in turn increasingly distanced itself from earlier pro-church positions, with the AfD’s leader, Alexander Gauland, finally declaring that the AfD is “not a Christian party”.

The role played by the church may also help explain the relative lack of religious rhetoric among right-wing populists in Britain. Neither Ukip nor the Leave campaign made significant efforts to turn Anglicanism into a part of their appeal. One reason may be the church’s pro-refugee stance and repudiation of earlier attempts by the BNP to employ Christianity.

Another may be the social composition of Anglicanism, which is often left-leaning in its leadership and increasingly highly educated and middle-class in its membership, whereas both Ukip and the Brexit campaign appealed primarily to the increasingly irreligious working class.

Churches in which leaders are more ambiguous or even sympathetic to right-wing populism also influence their followers. After initially opposing Trump, the American evangelical establishment has changed course and now – with some teeth-grinding – white evangelicals, especially those who rarely attend church, are some of the president’s most faithful defenders.

These trends suggest that far from being helpless bystanders to the co-opting of religion, the Christian churches could once again play a momentous role in Western politics. And they could soon face a strategic choice, either to ride the populist wave in the hope of increasing their political influence and keeping increasingly “unchurched” cultural Christians on board; or to reassert their authority by openly challenging the contradictions in right-wing populism’s use of rhetoric laden with religious references and its less than Christian policies.

Given the substantial moral authority religious leaders still enjoy – even in secular countries such as Britain, the Netherlands or Germany – this choice may have significant impact. Either way, scenes like those seen in Dresden, Paris, Milan or Florida are likely to become more common as the populist wave breaks across the West.

The German church condemned AfD’s use of Christian themes

Some social scientists speak of a growing schism between the traditional religious right and the new secular right. The former is composed of the churchgoing, educated middle classes and remains committed to church teachings on social conservatism and openness to immigration, and is attached to conservative political parties. The latter typically consists of working-class voters, and combines secular values with cultural nativism and authoritarian tendencies; it has less allegiance to church teachings, but looks more favourably on right-wing populist policies.