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## The paradox of religious populism : the curious case of Belgium

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# **THE PARADOX OF RELIGIOUS POPULISM - THE CURIOUS CASE OF BELGIUM**

*Johan Temmerman* \*

When one talks about populism from a religious perspective, the increasing diversity of philosophies of life cannot go unmentioned. This is strongly the case if one focuses on the Belgian context. The complex political structure with separate levels of government per language group resulted in a diffuse social climate, with Flemish and Walloon cultures on the one hand and Dutch and French as foot languages, complemented by German as the third official national language, and the Brussels cosmopolitan-oriented metropolis in between. This complex state structure came about through numerous historical-cultural shifts. In recent decades, globalisation and migration have added a number of specific elements to this complex society, making fluidity and multiple modernity characteristic of contemporary Belgium.

In this contribution I will outline the challenges that diversity and pluralism pose to religions, using this Belgian reality. First, I will provide a brief historical overview of the religious landscape in relation to political developments in Belgium. Next, I will mention the ecumenical and interreligious initiatives that are prevalent as

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\* PhD in Theology and Dean of Faculty of Protestant Theology and Religious Studies. © Globethics Publications, 2023 | DOI: 10.58863/20.500.12424/4291181 | CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International.

institutional responses to diversity and populism. During this brief study, I noticed a paradox in which populist conceptions of religion appeal to universalist foundations, but at the same time question this universalism when it comes to the plurality of meaning. Finally, I conceptualise the concept of pluralism theologically, in order to eliminate this paradox.

In the article, I use the often-quoted definition of populism from Cas Mudde. He describes political populism as being grounded in a dichotomy of society, with 'the people' opposed to 'the elite'. The people, through populist politicians, represent the 'true' and 'pure' general will, while the elite are corrupt and only pursue their own interests.<sup>1</sup>

Religious populism has rarely been studied. I use my own definition, based on some characteristics of the recruiting rhetoric that is popular in religious communities. These characteristics are a literal interpretation of holy texts and dogmatic rules of faith, the superiority of one's own tradition and a moral disapproval of modernity. Religious populism distinguishes between 'true' and 'false' believers, between those who practice religion personally and those who are 'lukewarm' (cultural) followers.

## **The Religious Landscape**

When Belgium was founded in 1830, it was given a very liberal constitution. Included in it was freedom of religion. This was a direct result of the *Constitution civile du clergé* concluded in 1790. Under the influence of the French Revolution, the property of the Catholic Church was confiscated, and priests were given civil service status. Following that, Napoleon concluded a concordat with Pope Pius VII on July 15,

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<sup>1</sup> Mudde, Cas (2019), "Populism in the Twenty-First Century: An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism", Pennsylvania: Penn Arts & Sciences, <https://amc.sas.upenn.edu/cas-mudde-populism-twenty-first-century> (accessed 13 July 2022).

1801, in which freedom of worship was restored, and in exchange for the church property already sold, the priests received a salary from the state. Both key moments mark what Marcel Gauchet calls the end of the absolutist phase in Europe, which from the 17th century onwards guarded the balance between secular and religious power. The Napoleon Concordat of 1801 reconciled the irreconcilables, according to Joseph Schumpeter, because it officially granted the church freedom of cult and, thus, to act socially while endorsing the primacy of the state. Priests were required to swear allegiance to the law.<sup>2</sup> The new Belgian constitution also organised freedom of religion in this way. In practice, this initially meant that on the religious level the Catholic Church recovered its dominant function. The French philosopher and politician Jules Simon (1814-1896) summarised it aptly when he wrote: “The State dominates the church, but in the state the church dominates.”<sup>3</sup> The Belgian constitution was a construction set up by an alliance of Catholics and liberals to oust Dutch King Willem I. After all, between 1814 and 1830, what is now Belgium belonged to the United Kingdom of the Netherlands and was governed from The Hague. The freedom of religion guaranteed by the new constitution came mainly down to Catholic freedoms. The main Protestant presence during the period of the United Kingdom were Dutch soldiers, merchants, and civil servants. Most of them disappeared after the proclamation of independent Belgium. Nevertheless, the small Protestant denomination obtained recognition, beside the even smaller Jewish and Anglican parishes, and could enjoy the established basic rights. This has since changed over the last 200 years. At present (2021), there are seven recognised cults, six of which are denominations (Catholic, Protestant Evangelical, Orthodox,

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<sup>2</sup> Schumpeter, Joseph, *Capitalism, socialism and democracy*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942, 336-337.

<sup>3</sup> Gauchet, Marcel, *La religion dans la démocratie. Parcours de la laïcité* (Nederlandse vertaling ‘Religie in de democratie’), Amsterdam: SUN, 1998, 59.

Anglican, Jewish and Muslim) and organised atheism. Procedures are underway to also recognise Buddhism in the future.

These formal and constitutionally entrenched freedoms do not follow the daily rapid changes. The reality of religious shifts has changed profoundly under the pressure of globalisation and migration. The sociocultural changes during the past decades show an extremely diffuse picture on religion. Migration fuels the attachment to traditional forms of religion. In Europe, 9 out of 10 migrants are religious. More than half (56%) are Christian, 27% are Muslim. The others call themselves Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist or Jewish. Only 1 in 10 is a non-believer. These usually migrate to Europe from Russia or China.<sup>4</sup> But religion is also increasing globally. During the Cold War, for example, Russia was proud of its atheism, while today the country explicitly presents itself as Orthodox, President Putin leading the way. In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is playing the Islamic card. In the Middle East, Southeast Asia, India, Myanmar and many other regions of the world, religion is growing. Extrapolation and projection of recent shifts in the global religious landscape predict a significant increase in major religions by 2060, while the number of unaffiliated will remain more or less stable. The primary reason is birth.<sup>5</sup> Religion is back. Globally, religion has re-entered the political scene. It is not expected to decline in the coming decades.

In Belgium specifically, these developments are evident. Changes are taking place in many areas and mainly have to do with increasing diversity. More than ever, we are confronted with countless expressions

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<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, “Faith on the move: The Religious Affiliation of International Migrants – Fact Sheet: European Union”, <https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2012/03/europe-fact-sheet.pdf> (accessed 13 July 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center (2017), “The Changing Global Religious Landscape”, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/> (accessed 13 July 2022)

of religious reality that coexist. There are 183 nationalities in Brussels.<sup>6</sup> On the religious map, the enormous increase in African churches stands out. The Islamic share of the religious market is also increasing. In Brussels, this rises to 30%, as does the Christian share. The remaining percentages concern all kinds of indigenous cults, alternative spirituality, and atheism. This increasing diversity, on the one hand, highlights the content dissonance and, on the other hand, underlines the fact that, in many cultures, religion is seamlessly linked with identity. These two components of the late modern religious landscape are closely linked. However, the philosophical landscape in the globalised world, whose metropolises and Brussels especially are more frequently becoming microcosms and culturally complex, presents a curious paradox. The internal contradiction is expressed in the observation that the presence and confrontation of religions and cultures simultaneously stimulate an intensification and adherence to one's own tradition. The more traditions and cultures live together, the stronger the concentration of the self and family. A particular observation in this respect in Belgium is that, among young people between 14 and 25 years of age, the pronounced ideological orientation in large cities is significantly higher than in the rest of the country. This is especially true for Muslims and atheists, while young people in cities refer to themselves as less Catholic or indifferent.<sup>7</sup> What is remarkable is that young people in metropolitan areas identify more strongly with religion or atheism than they do elsewhere. According to the researchers, this has to do with a symbolic value, whereby one honours standards and traditions without

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<sup>6</sup> Bruzz, "JOUW VRAAG. Welke nationaliteiten zijn niet of nauwelijks vertegenwoordigd in Brussel?", <https://www.bruzz.be/samenleving/jouw-vraag-welke-nationaliteiten-zijn-niet-nauwelijks-vertegenwoordigd-brussel-2019-05> (accessed 13 July 2022)

<sup>7</sup> Jeugd Onderzoeks Platform, "Facts & Figures: Religie bij Vlaamse jongeren", [https://www.jeugdonderzoeksplatform.be/files/Facts\\_and\\_Figures\\_\\_religie.pdf](https://www.jeugdonderzoeksplatform.be/files/Facts_and_Figures__religie.pdf) (accessed 13 July 2022)

practicing religion as such. Formal rather than lived. This also applies to the number of young people who call themselves 'Christian'. What is remarkable and not surprising is that children of migrants of all backgrounds attach more importance to religion than natives. These figures and observations underline what I call the philosophical paradox of globalisation: the more diverse the multitude, the more intense the singular.

## **Religion and Populism**

The paradox reported above results in religion and traditions being reduced to markers of identity on the one hand, and a radicalisation trend occurring within religious experience on the other. Identity and radicalisation are two elements that link contemporary religion with populism. Most researchers of late modern populism agree that the inequality created by neoliberal capitalism generates an anti-elitist attitude. Researchers use an ideational approach to political positioning that pinpoint the dysfunction of representative democracy. This is how one distinguishes populists from genuine politicians. The empirical investigation of contemporary populism conducted by Cas Mudde sets the tone. He defines populism as:

“A thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mudde, C. and Kaltwasser, C.R., “Populism and (Liberal) Democracy: A Framework for Analysis” in: Mudde, C. and Kaltwasser, R.C. (ed.), *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, 25.

Populists claim only they represent the people, thus appealing to the symbolic representation of the general will. This is particularly important in assessing the connection between religion and populism. Axel Mueller and others emphasise in this regard that the anti-elite stance is, therefore, always linked to an anti-pluralistic connotation: we and only we are the people.<sup>9</sup> This positioning uses religious traditions to denote the identity that characterises the true people. Oliver Roy points out the ambivalence that characterises the use of religion in populist movements. As an example, he examined the French *Front National*, the extreme-right party of Marine Le Pen. She uses Christianity to oppose Islam, but at the same time criticises the institutional churches of being too liberal, especially on migration issues. She also denounces conservative church morality in terms of family and sexuality. This ambivalent attitude allows the *Front National* to simultaneously denounce the French political elite while relying on the distinctive French identity of anticlerical *laïcité*. Roy concludes that in populist parties:

“Religion matters first and foremost as a marker of identity, enabling them to distinguish between the good ‘us’ and the bad ‘them’.”<sup>10</sup>

Christianity as a national identity, Roy said, is so thin-centred that it can be easily hijacked. The same is true of Islam, but in reverse. Populist parties oppose migration and use a barbaric image of what Islam is, according to their rhetoric. They say that European Christian culture is civilised, while Islam has not experienced an Enlightenment and

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<sup>9</sup> Mueller, A., “The meaning of ‘populism’” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 45(9-10), 2019, 1029, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0191453719872277> (accessed 13 July 2022)

<sup>10</sup> Roy, O., “The French National Front: From Christian Identity to Laïcité”, in Marzouki, N., McDonnell, D. and Roy, O. (ed.), *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion*, London: Hurst and Publishers, 2016, 79-93.

consequently has remained stuck in a precivilisation phase. This gives rise to a form of Christianity, as in the US after 9/11 and in the Netherlands after the murders of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh, one that mainly floats on strong fears channelled into an anti-Islam discourse.<sup>11</sup> These studies show that religion plays an identitarian and negative role in the current populist political climate. One is only Christian to the extent that one is opposed to Islam.

In a survey article on the recent growth of populism in the perspective of religion, Daniel Nilsson DaHanas and Marat Shterin see a remarkable connection with the pioneering sociology of Emile Durkheim. Starting with the ambiguity outlined above with which populists use religion, they point to the notion of the 'sacred people.' In populist discourse, their own people are 'sacred' and their cultural values superior to those of others. In the Durkheimian perspective, in which the religion of a people symbolises its organisation and resulting identity, populists name the thoughts and feelings of the people as absolute beyond temporal reality, elevated as the norm of society.<sup>12</sup> These lofty values allow for the uncritical dissemination of false news and the targeting of people for self-interest in the name of the general popular will, as the election of Trump and the Brexit referendum in 2016 illustrate. In this regard, it is particularly interesting to note the extent to which the Christian religion contributed to both populist trends. In the U.S., it was clear that the politically active right-wing Evangelical movement was a strong support for Donald Trump during his campaign, whereas this was not the case in England. In the UK, traditional Anglicanism was a strong supporter of Brexit, while British

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<sup>11</sup> Brubacker, R., "Between Nationalism and Civilization: The European Populist Movement in Comparative Perspective" in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40(8), 2017, 1191-1226.

<sup>12</sup> Nilsson, Daniel / Shterin, Marat, "Religion and the rise of populism" in *Religion, State & Society* 46(3), 2018, 177-185.

Evangelicalism had a pro-European profile.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, the notion of sacred people and values makes it possible for populist movements to turn against two enemies at the same time: against the elite and against the other, this is against mainstream politicians and migrants. Both threaten the 'sacred' values of the people. Religion, both in its original dynamic (Durkheim) and in its substantive dogmatic form, facilitates political populism. These lines of connection between religion and populism should alert theologians and church leaders not to allow themselves to be taken for a ride. Religious traditions have multiple facets and faces. The political significance of religion - already present in its most elementary forms - prompts us to leave behind the naive assumption that religion and traditions are purely an empowering force. The connection between religion and populism also inspires us to thoroughly consider the meaning of the 'sacred' in light of the changing world.

## **Populism and Self-governance**

Let us return to Belgium. Belgium's curious situation has historical and social roots. At its foundation and for the first 100 years, Belgium was run by the French-speaking elite. Wallonia was more prosperous than Flanders, which lived largely from agriculture. A growing industrialisation and the presence of the ports of Antwerp and Zeebrugge, along with the phasing out of the mining industry in Wallonia, caused a reversal of the social landscape. Flanders took the lead, with attention to language and self-government, establishing a disempowered political class. Religious legitimacy was provided by a conservative Catholicism that was ubiquitous in Flanders before World War II. But this Flemish Movement became compromised during the 20th century by outspoken sympathies for, and in some cases

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<sup>13</sup> Nilsson, Daniel / Shterin, Marat, *ibid.*180.

collaboration with, the German occupiers during 1940-45. This period, in which economic revival was accompanied by strong pillarisation and rigid religious Catholicism was aptly described by Flemish novelist Hugo Claus in *The Sorrow of Belgium* (1983).<sup>14</sup> At the end of the 20th century, a renewed democratic form of nationalism emerged in Flanders. This tendency is completely absent in the French-speaking part of the country, where a strong 'Belgicist' policy sets the tone. This puts communities in Belgian under constant political pressure, with one region striving for self-government and another region particularly wanting to preserve and strengthen the unitary structure.<sup>15</sup> Underlying this peculiar situation is a shift in the social map, with Flanders initially needing Walloon support when the French language dominated the administration in Belgium, while the situation was completely reversed after World War II, with a Walloon region needing the unitary state in terms of social services.

In terms of religion, no less drastic shifts occurred. First, there is the fact that secularisation has been proceeding at an unprecedented rate since the 1970s. The Catholic Church in Belgium has suffered from ongoing scandals surrounding child abuse. In addition, Belgium, like the rest of the Western world, experienced a sharp increase in migrant churches at the beginning of the 21st century. The traditional religious institutions are under pressure and can maintain themselves through the state support that is still in place. The value of cultural heritage plays an important role in this regard. But at the same time, the law of the free market also dictates the religious 'economy'. It is in this area that religion once again threatens to fall into the troubled waters of political populism. In the 19th century, Catholic identity played an important role

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<sup>14</sup> Claus, Hugo, *The Sorrow of Belgium*, New York: Abrams Books, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Following the 2012 local elections, political scientist Cas Mudde analysed the peculiar and complex political situation in Belgium: <https://www.open-democracy.net/en/flemish-nationalism-new-landscape/>.

in the emancipation of the predominantly Flemish and poor agricultural and working-class population. The actions of priest Deans (1839-1907), who fought against child labour and for equal rights, and as a result clashed with the Church authorities in Rome, forms the backbone of the Catholic labour movement to this day. Another famous novelist, Louis-Paul Boon, described the life of Deans and did the same for the struggles in the 16th century, when Flanders was the scene of religious developments that led to Protestantism.<sup>16</sup> But completely intertwined with these social struggles, in both the 16th and 19th centuries, was the commitment to emancipation. The use of the vernacular provided a lever to create its own level of government. It is noteworthy that the Protestant tradition, which received a strong impetus from the liberal party in the 19th century, was not unaffected either. Here too religion was used to underscore the identity of the people. The movement of liberal Protestantism was famous in this respect, which arose around figures such as Emile De Laveleye, Goblet D'Aviella and Paul Fredericq. In the Flemish part of the country, this movement supported the so-called 'orangism', which advocated the restoration of unity with the Netherlands. This political struggle was fully democratic. It changed when, first during World War I and then from the 1930s onwards, part of this movement saw an opportunity to install self-government with the help of the German occupiers. This resulted in an extreme Front movement and collaboration. Political populism gained religious legitimacy in these groups. However, this trend has completely disappeared, merged into the far-right populist party *Vlaams Belang* (Flemish Interest) on the one hand and the democratic nationalist party *N-VA* (New Flemish Alliance) on the other. Politically, both parties

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<sup>16</sup> The life of priest Deans was described in: Boon, Louis-Paul, *Priester Deans of hoe in de negentiende eeuw de arbeiders van Aalst vochten tegen armoede en onrecht*, Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1992. The 16th century is covered in: Boon, Louis-Paul, *Het Geuzenboek*, Amsterdam: DE Arbeiderspers, 2013.

advocate subordinating religion to the common values, which are grounded in the Enlightenment and linked by language and constitution. This puts them on the same line of all parties in Belgium. Contemporary political populism manifests itself mainly in the area of migration policy. And religion plays an important role in this.

## **Politics of Fear**

The peculiarity of the Belgian situation with regard to religion and politics comes to the fore in the relationship between the recognised religious cults and the ‘free’ churches. The relationship touches on the foundations of what religion means socially. As I described above, the recognised religions can lean on a longstanding political goodwill. Despite the various historical and moral debacles that have taken place over the past 200 years, freedom of religion remains an unshakeable constitutional right. This includes financial support. However, in two different waves after both World Wars and due to recent migration, the share of free and indigenous churches and religions have grown significantly. The recognised institutions have had to give up considerable ground. An important recruiting argument of these free churches, besides the ethnically determined sociality, is the reproach that traditional churches compromise with political and moral liberalism. Even though the church leadership in Rome disapproves of women in the ministry or of homosexual relations, the local bishops’ rush to report time and again that the soup is not eaten as hot as it is served.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The most recent controversy arose in March 2021 when the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome issued a document that a blessing of homosexual couples is not permitted, to which the Bishop of Antwerp Bishop Bonny promptly responded, expressing "deep sorrow and embarrassment for his church. Published in the main newspapers *De Morgen* and *De Standaard* of March 17, 2021: <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/ik-voel-plaatsvervangende->

Likewise, evangelical tendencies within Protestantism, injected in Flanders mainly by missionaries from the U.S. and the Netherlands and in Wallonia from France and Switzerland, employ a rigid Biblical literacy when it comes to morality and human rights. Add to this the most recent growth of radicalisation within Islam, with the proportion of Belgian youth involved in terror attacks and the war in Syria being significant, and it is not surprising that the image of religion in Belgium is highly charged, if not very negative. The recruiting power emanating from these new churches and faith communities is usually linked to an anti-modernist and anti-scientific attitude, which often takes on 'sectarian' allure. In Christian circles, this tracks with an anti-Islam discourse, which links these movements with political populism. That is why I speak of 'religious populism' in this context. It is grounded in the literal interpretation of the Bible, the superiority of Christianity, and a moral avoidance of the world. The theological distinction between 'good' or 'real' believers and between 'lukewarm' or 'liberal' believers feed the distinction between 'us' and 'them'.

The Austrian theologian Wolfgang Palaver speaks in this context of inner group solidarity and calibrates the term "parochial altruism".<sup>18</sup> Anthropologists have already pointed to the ethnocentric confinement of humanity within the boundaries of the tribe, village, or language community. Economists also point out that this ingroup solidarity influences political decision-making in modernity. The basic pattern of parochial altruism reinforces the internal cohesion with an external enemy. Hence, political populist movements can mobilise on a large scale. In a recent article, Palaver points out that this mobilisation

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schaamte-bisschop-bonny-excuseert-zich-voor-vaticaan-standpunt-over-homoseksualiteit~bded456a/

<sup>18</sup> Palaver, Wolfgang, "Parochial altruism and Christian universalism: On the deep difficulties of creating solidarity without outside enemies" in: Dumouchel, P. and Gotoh, R (eds.), *Social bonds as freedom: Revisiting the dichotomy of the universal and the particular*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2015, 153-173.

contributes to a social climate in which fear rules. Religious violence legitimises populist fearmongering. In order to overcome this current problem, religious communities will have to become aware of the mechanism of parochial altruism in order to extend it to civil society in a pre-political realm.<sup>19</sup> In doing so, Palaver appeals to the distinction made by Henri Bergson (1859-1941) in *The Two Sources of Morality* (1935), where he distinguishes a closed society with a static religion from an open society with a dynamic religion. The latter has roots in a mystical experience of religion, which also characterised the Hebrew prophets and Jesus. The major obstacle to static religion in today's globalised world is religious pluralism. Consequently, political populism and static religion both float on a social climate of fear. There are, however, tendencies and movements within all religious traditions that stimulate an open and pluralistic view of the religion in question, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.<sup>20</sup> The issue for Palaver and others is to provide for a "monotheistic pluralism" that offers religious security without reserving it for a single tradition.

## **Interreligious Dialogue**

More than 84% of the world's population calls itself a 'believer'.<sup>21</sup> There are about 4300 different belief systems whose adherents use the

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<sup>19</sup> Palaver, Wolfgang, "Populism and religion: On the politics of fear" in *Dialog* 58(1)22-29, 2019, 26.

<sup>20</sup> We can refer to: Sacks, Jonathan, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, New York: Schocken Books, 2015; Aslan, Reza, *No God but God: The origins, evolution, and future of Islam*, New York: Random House; Moyaert, Marianne, *Leven in Babelse tijden. De noodzaak van een interreligieuze dialoog*, Antwerpen/Utrecht: Pelckmans/Klement, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> A comprehensive demographic study in over 230 countries conducted by Pew Research Centre's Forum on Religion & Public Life estimates that about 5.8 billion people in the world are religiously oriented, which is 84% of 6.9 billion.

term 'religion'. The global reality that religion is more than ever present is the cause of constant confrontation and dialogue. Given the multiplicity, it is becoming increasingly difficult to defend the view that only one religion expresses the full truth. In this respect, religious populism is polarising and misleading. But globalisation also poses challenges to established religious institutions. From the end of the 19th century, awareness grew of the need for dialogue. The 1893 World's Parliament of Religions is generally recognised as the beginning of organised interreligious dialogue. The first meeting took place in Chicago. From then on inter-religious dialogue gained in importance, especially after the Second World War. At the beginning of the 1960s, the awareness that cultures other than Western Christianity were of great value in religious terms grew. Both the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church showed an increasing interest in other religions from this period onwards.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, interreligious dialogue has become established in the institutional religions. The 'free churches' keep their distance from these initiatives.

Sallie King sees seven platforms or phenomena of interreligious dialogue: (1) diplomacy between institutions, (2) parliamentary monologue in which religious leaders present their program, (3) verbal exchange between theologians/experts, (4) grassroots intervisitation, (5)

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<https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>  
(accessed 20 April 2021)

<sup>22</sup> The Second Vatican Council, held in Rome between 1962 and 1965, issued a document called *Nostra Aetate* ('In our time'), which addressed the value of other traditions. Although the Catholic tradition remained the ultimate expression of truth, the document confirmed that other traditions equally contained elements of truth. This made the inter-religious dynamic possible for Catholics. In 1971, the World Council of Churches (WCC) issued its own guidelines for 'dialogue with people of living faith and ideology'. King, Sallie B., "Interreligious Dialogue" in: Meister, Chad (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, Oxford University Press, 2011, 101-114.

spiritual dialogue or ritual exchange, (6) joint practical initiatives and (7) internal dialogue.<sup>23</sup> These different levels are well established in the Western world. In Belgium, too, there are numerous inter-religious initiatives in connection with organised atheism. What is special is that these initiatives are often organised by the various governments. For example, Belgium has a Council of Interfaith Dialogue (FILD), in both national languages. But there is also a Flemish Interfaith Dialogue (VILD) and a 'Kreis' in East Belgium for the German-speaking community. Ecumenical and interreligious platforms also exist between the religious institutions themselves, such as the Belgian Council of Religious Leaders, the Consultation of Christian Churches and a Consultation on Christian-Jewish Relations (OCJB).<sup>24</sup> At the grassroots level in local faith communities belonging to recognised institutions, there are numerous initiatives that bring religions closer together. Organising joint celebrations, sharing buildings with each other and mutual solidarity have been very scarce up to now. Religious dialogue is extremely useful but threatens to remain as just words if there is no concrete rapprochement in terms of content. This brings us to the problem of religious pluralism.

## **Religious Pluralism**

The main obstacle to interreligious dialogue is the perception that the participants are bowing to a far-reaching relativisation of the religion itself. This religious relativism is expressed in a dialogue in which everyone sticks to their faith. Then, people exchange friendly opinions, but do not move an inch from their own position, let alone closer to the

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<sup>23</sup> King, *ibidem.*, 101-102.

<sup>24</sup> With thanks to the president of the United Protestant Church in Belgium (VPKB/EPUB) Rev. Steven Fuite and academic researcher Practical Theology drs. Edwin Delen for the information.

other. The interreligious dialogue, however necessary, addresses only one side of religion, namely that of subjective signification. Everyone believes in his or her own. But religion also has another side, for the specific signification is also presented. Religious representations, precepts, and obligations, as well as customs and culture, differ profoundly in the various religions, as well as in denominations and strains within each tradition. Add to this the modernist world view in which science sets the tone when it comes to the origin of the universe and life on earth. In globalised secular societies, it is impossible to reach a moral consensus on religious grounds. Science and human rights demand a pluralistic approach and, consequently, a relativisation of religious representations. The specific expression of religious truth is different in each religion. As a result, during interreligious dialogue, people do not talk about what divides them but what unites them. Underlying this connection is the philosophy that all religions are essentially grounded in the same core idea. Religious pluralism then boils down to the 'golden rule', which is also contained in universal human rights. An additional problem faced by religious leaders and experts committed to interreligious dialogue is what anthropologist Pascal Boyer calls the 'tragedy of the theologian',<sup>25</sup> whereby often inspiring and charismatic figures from the faith community or tradition proclaim messages that contradict routinised versions of religious authorities. The theologian is expected to proclaim what people want to hear, rather than what his expertise implies.

Besides this religious relativism and pluralism, a third non-exclusive tendency can be distinguished, namely that of *henofideism*. Religious fideism reinforces the choice of one's own tradition and, at the same time, allows one's own representations to converge with other traditional

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<sup>25</sup> Boyer, Pascal, *Religion Explained. The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*, New York: Basis Books, 2001, 283-285.

representations.<sup>26</sup> Here the well-known image of the elephant applies, whereby one tradition feels the trunk and another the leg or the tail. Every tradition has a different idea of what the elephant looks like. In *henofideism*, therefore, there is an epistemological plurality. No religion has direct access to the complete truth, and its representations depend on the worldview and context in which one lives. This third view is closely aligned with religious pluralism and also allows for local differences within each tradition.

## Conclusion

In this contribution, I argue that trust in religious traditions can overcome the paradox of modern populism. To do so, it is necessary to loosen the exclusivism towards religious representations. Religious pluralism is a fact. The illiberal tendencies of political populism, in reaction against non-democratic liberalism, threaten the use of religions as identity markers. Religious populism follows the same methodology and applies a separation between dissenters on the outside and 'false' (cultural) believers on the inside. The paradox lies in the appeal that exclusive beliefs make to the universalism of their representations, while the same universalism is rejected when it comes to meaning.

It will be up to theologians and other experts in the future to develop a constructive vision and to think through their own tradition in an inclusive way.

To this end, I offer *henofideism* as a third way between religious relativism and pluralism. Deepening one's own tradition may call for an inward-looking form of 'recognition' of connectedness as a fundamental expression of the divine. But to remove the risk of a mystifying faith, a

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<sup>26</sup> For an overview of the different forms and problems of religious pluralism: Runzo, Joseph, "Pluralis mand Relativism" in Meister, Chad (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, Oxford University Press, 2011, 61-76.

resolute horizontalisation of God's will in the world must flank this focus on one's own tradition. The global reality of religious diversity obliges every tradition to rethink itself in the context of greater coherence and equality, sustainability, and human rights, if institutions for survival are not to be bogged down in religious populism. Herein also lies the relevance of religious traditions in a globalised secular society.