

# Globethics Repository

The logo for Globethics, featuring the word "Globethics" in white, sans-serif font centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

## Religion and populism, nationalist and ultranationalist ideologies : root causes of current malaise

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Diop, Ganoune
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.58863/20.500.12424/4291173">10.58863/20.500.12424/4291173</a>
Publisher	Globethics Publications;Conference of European Churches
Rights	2023 Globethics Publications & CEC;Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International
Download date	2026-07-10 22:40:52
Item License	<a href="http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/">http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/</a>
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/4291173">http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/4291173</a>

# **RELIGION AND POPULISM, NATIONALIST AND ULTRANATIONALIST IDEOLOGIES**

## **ROOT CAUSES OF CURRENT MALAISE**

*Ganoune Diop\**

In the context of framing our topic, and for the sake of clarity, I will successively address the issue of religion and its intersection with contemporary populism, nationalist, and ultranationalist ideologies. The primary focus will be on populism, while articulating principles that may be relevant to challenging nationalist and ultranationalist ideologies.

It is well documented that, throughout history, religions, along with philosophical and political ideologies, have been instrumentalised with devastating consequences for the human family. Wars and revolutions testify to this fact.

The particular lens through which I will be reading the undergirding issues, and their effects and damaging consequences on societal relationships, is the predicament of violence. More specifically, how violence is instrumentalised by means of discriminations rooted in

---

\* Ph.D., Director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists World Headquarters, Secretary-General of International Religious Liberty Association, Secretary for the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communions. © Globethics Publications, 2023 | DOI: 10.58863/20.500.12424/4291173 | CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International.

phobia and the criminalisation of others as a last step towards legitimating the infliction of pain, murder and ultimately genocide.

## **On Religion**

Among the most plausible of the hypotheses on the etymology of ‘religion’ is that it originates from the Latin word *religare*, meaning ‘the binding of people around beliefs, values and worldview’. The same root is shared with the word ‘ligament’.<sup>1</sup>

At their core, religions bring people together, binding them with bonds of solidarity, esteem, care and, ultimately, love.

From the onset, let me affirm that religious actors are mandated to bring people together, bonding around values of our common humanity and several intersections of values. This is our current noble privilege.

At its core, religion is about the promotion of life and sustaining life in the best way possible. It is about celebrating the dignity and mystery of the life of every person.

What could best illustrate the vital and most noble human solidarity than to affirm life, to respect the infinite value of every person, and to protect life?

This fundamental moral imperative leads us to resist and refuse a culture of death, violence, and the violation of people’s integrity, whether physical, mental, emotional or spiritual. Religions betray their intrinsic vocation when they embrace the path of violence and death.

The core calling of religions - their common vocation - is expressed in concepts such as the protection of others, upholding the integrity of their personhood, and safeguarding their dignity.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Eberle, Gary: *Dangerous Words: Talking about God in an Age of Fundamentalism*, Boston & London: Trumpeter, 2007, 111.

All religious actors can, and therefore must, partner to work together in the prevention of violence against human beings, societies, and minorities.

This partnership need not mean that people believe the same in all things. The dignity of difference is at the heart of peaceful coexistence. Obviously, it helps to have a consensus on what is considered as wrong. Unequivocally, inflicting pain on people, harming, hurting, torturing, and killing is wrong.

When human rights were delineated in a language cognisant of the traumas inherent to the post world wars and post holocaust era, they were meant to state the only legitimate foundation on which to relate to other human beings: human dignity. Human dignity, along with the inseparable freedom of conscience, were also meant to state the evident, that the future of peaceful coexistence is inseparable from pluralism. The sharing of the space of civil society necessarily includes difference. But these differences need not generate antagonism, hostility, and feuding. Further still, it stated that:

“A universal regime of human rights protection ought to be compatible with moral pluralism. That is, it should be possible to maintain regimes of human rights protection in a wide variety of civilizations, cultures, and religions, each of which happens to disagree with the other as to what a good human life should be. Another way of putting the same thought is that people from different culture may continue to disagree about what is good, but nevertheless agree about what is insufferably, arguably wrong.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Ignatieff, Michael, “Human Rights as Politics II. Human Rights as Idolatry.”, [https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/\\_resources/documents/a-to-z/i/Ignatieff\\_01.pdf](https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_resources/documents/a-to-z/i/Ignatieff_01.pdf) (accessed on 15 March 2022)

All can agree with the fact that violence against human beings, murder, and genocides based on the refusal of other peoples' right to be different, are terribly wrong.

## **On Populism, Nationalism and Ultra Nationalism**

The first hurdle to grasping the meaning of populism and exclusivist ideologies resides in the understanding of these phenomena. Experts call populism one of the most used and abused terms inside and outside of academia.<sup>3</sup>

It has been stated that

“Developing a plausible and useful definition of populism is anything but simple. To confront this problem, more than forty years ago a group of well-known scholars participated in a conference held in London under the title ‘To Define Populism.’ As the report of this conference (Berlin, Hofstadter, MacRae et al. 1968) and the famous edited volume resulting from it (Ionescu and Gellner 1969) reveal the participants used the term populism for such a perplexing variety of phenomena that the organizers seem to have made little effort to establish a minimum definitional agreement. More than forty years later the number of scholars of populism has increased manifold and we are probably even further from a definitional consensus within the scholarly community.”<sup>4</sup>

A detailed account of the various theories of populism will not be provided here. These include approaches that cast populism as a political

---

<sup>3</sup> See Mudde, Cas/ Kaltwasser, Cristobal R. “Populism and [liberal] Democracy: A Framework for Analysis] in Mudde, Cas/ Kaltwasser, Cristobal (eds.), *Populism in Europe and in the Americas.*” In *Populism in Europe and the Americas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

movement, fostering multi-class alliances, or populism as a political style characterised by the promotion of a link between political leaders and the electorate, loose enough to conflate phenomena like demagoguery or opportunism with populism. Another approach to populism is to consider it as a particular political logic “characterized by confrontation of the existing hegemony by means of a discursive construction capable of dividing the social into two camps, namely ‘the power bloc’ versus the people.”<sup>5</sup>

Obviously, the word populist is polysemic. Its various usages in different contexts make it imperative to carefully delineate the semantic fields in which it intersects with many other concepts and certain philosophical content and perspectives.

What is of interest, in our context, is the instrumentalization of grievances and the mobilisation of deadly impulses that have characterised our world in recent decades. These have been a weapon of choice for opportunistic, unscrupulous individuals in political gain.

In his recent book entitled *Economics for the Common Good*, Jean Tirole wrote:

“Throughout the world, populist parties on both the right and left are gaining ground. ‘Populism’ is hard to define because it takes many forms, but one common thread is the exacerbated eagerness to exploit the ignorance and prejudice of voters. Fanning widespread hostility to immigrants, distrust of free trade, and xenophobia plays on people’s fears. Rising populism clearly has specific causes in different countries, but anxieties about technological change and employment, the financial crisis, the

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 6.

slowdown in economic growth, rising debt, and increasing inequality seem to be universal factors.”<sup>6</sup>

Broadly defined, “Populism is a political philosophy supporting the rights and power of the people in their struggle against a privileged elite... Political parties and politicians often use the term ‘populist’ and ‘populism’ as pejoratives against their opponents.”<sup>7</sup>

From another perspective, populism claims, on the one hand, justice and restoration of privileges, but on the other hand in recent years, as a tool for mass manipulation, thus eroding the very foundation of the notion of rights. It deliberately chooses particularism over universality of rights.

It is critical to understand this later aspect. Nationalist ideologies refuse globalisation for a reason. They prefer the particular over the universal. No wonder they resist the regime of human rights, precisely because these rights are intrinsically universal. They question the relevance or necessity of organisations such as the United Nations because of their unapologetic promotion and protection of universal values, universal rights, universal inherent dignity, universal justice, and universal peace.

What was originally politically destined to restore justice in the distribution of rights becomes construed on a defective mode of identity, an identity based on visceral antagonism against demonised supposed enemies who are perceived as perpetual threats to the survival or even well-being of a group.

On another level, from the perspective of group psychology, populism has become a way of coping with tribal trauma generated by memories of past wounds. It can also be an attempt at stifling difficult memories.

---

<sup>6</sup> Tirole, Jean, *Economics for the Common Good*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

The repertoire of populism expands through many forms. The so-called Curse of Ham on black people has been one of its declinations throughout slavery, and the subjugation of women and the still difficult acceptance and embrace of gender equality are lingering stigma in the humanisation of our world.

Populism as diverted from its core project of restoration of justice, is antithetical to the dignity of every human being. It goes with the concepts of exceptionalism, and it manifests a destiny to the detriment of others. It contradicts the idea of a common good and a common destiny, and therefore undermines solidarity in a shared human identity.

What started as a call to justice turned into a weapon of division. Populism is now based on a philosophy of exclusion, feeding into an instability fuelled by distrust and often resorting to violence, checked only by the deliberate deterrent of violence, which is part of the mandate of the state. There are other factors to consider.

After describing the symptoms of the democracy crisis and the recent gains of authoritarian ideologies in many parts of the world, Yascha Mounk, the Harvard lecturer on government at the Center of European Studies, concludes the following:

“There can no longer be any doubt that we are going through a populist moment. The question now is whether this populist moment will turn into a populist age—and cast the very survival of liberal democracy in doubt.”<sup>8</sup>

The reference to a populist age certainly seems to indicate a widespread phenomenon that connects various sectors of human experience, from politics, social psychology, economics, geopolitical sciences, religion, and philosophies of life.

---

<sup>8</sup> See Mounk, Yascha. *The People Vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save It*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018, 2.

Once again, how should we define populism when a consensus on its content and scope has been hard to find?

Populism in its legitimate form is a movement of resistance that disqualifies the use of people as a means to an end—the end being benefits and privileges for a few.

Populism has lost its vocation and turned against its initial legitimate struggle. It has turned against the people, be they minorities, migrants, asylum seekers, foreigners, or sojourners. It has become violent.

Another insidious twist is that the resort to violence to deprive most of the world's population of the means to live in dignity has surely been a trigger to episodic mass revolt, rebellion, or insurrections.

A new and widespread consequence of populism is the hijacking of people's grievances by members of the elite who benefit most from the world's resources. Currently, in many parts of the world, privileged elites have mastered the pretence that they are the solution to reversing the plight and predicaments of the people.

A socio-political reading of our current challenges in national and international arenas may lead to the temptation to reduce the issues of populism through the lens of the survival or demise of liberal democracies or democracy itself. However, our basic postulate is that there are other dimensions to take into consideration. These include economics but also, more fundamentally, philosophical, anthropological and theo-anthropological perspectives. I would like to highlight the human rights perspective, especially the first term 'human'.

The following question is ultimately at stake: what does it really mean to be human?

Populism is a multifaceted phenomenon, revealing the disenchantment of human beings in societal structures that have been unable to bring about justice. Populism manifests symptoms of deeper human frustration: our failure to live up to our vocation of being human

and humane. The solutions it proposes are, paradoxically, to be more inhuman and inhumane.

### ***Problems with Illegitimate Populisms***

Today, populist ideology has tended to revert to exclusivist nationalisms. Populism presents itself as a defender of the people's interests but, at the same time, it is a stark negation or reversal of the gains of universalism.

It feeds a need for recognition while demonstrating an addiction to trampling human dignity; it is a claim of rights and simultaneously a chronic dehumanising of supposed enemies of the people. It inherently erodes liberal democracy in favour of what has been termed hierarchical democracy.

Today's populism claims to uphold justice but it saps the very foundations of justice. One of the basic principles of any legitimate judicial system - innocent until proven guilty - is perverted into guilty without an opportunity to prove one's innocence. Fake news, a post-truth milieu and the deliberate blurring of standards of morality are characteristics of a populist age.

One of the fears present in populist movements is the loss of privileges, which they may not even possess but dream of having. These fears are not necessarily implausible or groundless. The history of economic depressions, financial crises, and market crashes - along with subsequent losses and suffering, especially of the people from the middle classes down - make people predict the worst if current privileges are lost. It is at this intersection of past experiences and the fear of future disaster that xenophobia and politicisation of migration crises come to the fore.

### ***Economic and Financial Crises as Fuel for Populist Movements***

The discontent and disenchantment of people in many countries has been exacerbated not just by economic inequality, but by crony

capitalism coupled with the increasing wealth of the owners of global corporations, by the exploitation of the financial markets and the lack of economic growth for the masses.

“American populism dates back to the economic depression that followed Reconstruction, and the failure of the economy to secure the economic and social positions of farmers and urban workers. The new corporations promised to revive industrial prosperity but enriched mostly their owners and bureaucrats.”<sup>9</sup>

The real issue that slows down the economy is:

“The ‘financialization’ of American corporations: their accumulation, on an unprecedented scale, of liquid assets that are turned over in the financial markets rather than in real business activity.”<sup>10</sup>

After the Great Depression and Reconstruction and after the market crash, populism gains momentum. A paradox appears in the fact that popular sentiment is unscrupulously exploited through demagoguery.

Principal actors of big corporations have learned how to tap into popular frustrations and sense of injustice and utilize these to their own advantage. Thus, in a strange twist of events, the freedom of the forces of the market economy have supplanted the freedom of people.

The elite, formerly accused of being the perpetrators of the plight of the people, now appear to be the only ones who can solve the problems of the people. They do it by the claim to exceptionalism and manifest destiny as leaders of the people and of the world.

---

<sup>9</sup> Toporowski, Jan, “Old Populism and the New Ideas of Michal Kalecki.”, *American Affairs*II (2), 2018, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

***Populism and the Return to Tribalism of Identity Politics***

Current manifestations of tribalism across the globe ignore and erode the foundation of the universal bond that binds all human beings. Within the American context, Jonah Goldberg argues:

“The great irony of all this is that identity politics wins not by making compelling arguments but by exploiting the inherent decency of the American people, including most ironically, liberal college professors who are terrified of being called racist, even when the accuser is a cynical opportunist, poltroon, or emotionally immature waif.”<sup>11</sup>

He adds:

“Populist demagogues promise not only they have the answer to ease the pain of change (“free the silver! Tariffs! Share the wealth! Build a wall!), but that they will punish the culprits responsible. Such promises are a thick miasma of snake oil containing healthy portions of nostalgia, demonization, and scapegoating.”<sup>12</sup>

Our age is characterized by disenchantment and distrust towards institutions. But this need not end in a pessimistic cul-de-sac with no way out.

***Way Forward: Mobilization of all Sectors of Civil Society***

Religions claim to be universal. This is understandable since religions attempt to solve human predicaments. They propose solutions to problems faced by the human family. They may identify these problems differently; nevertheless, they all claim and promise a better

---

<sup>11</sup> Goldberg, Jonah, *Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy*, New York: Crown Publishing, 2018, 218.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

life for humans. In this endeavor, religions are invitations to paths of liberations and, in general, liberation from debilitating circumstances. Many call such circumstances inhibition to human flourishing, others evil and expressions of evils.

Populist irrational demonization of the foreigner, the migrant and asylum seeker is harbored in humans who indulge in hatred and who resist and refuse love of others.

A mindset that indulges hostility towards others because they are different creates a toxic world, which perpetrates its toxicity through suspicions of conspiracy theories. This mentality fosters hostility towards people groups because of past family, tribe, ethnic group, people groups or nations feuds.

The part of populism that is deeply troubling is when people construct narratives of past hurts and build defense mechanisms supposed to protect from those hurts.

There are too many generational feuds resurfacing every so often, based on what ancestors of a people group have done in the past. This only perpetuates evil and helps it spread.

Where should we go from here? How do we envision a common future? What is the path forward for a better tomorrow?

Singling out “whites” because of the conquests of the Americas, depopulation of Africa and slavery, colonization and imperialism would be a sure path toward scapegoating, animosity, vengeful populism and ultimately wars and destruction. The whole human family would lose.

Remembering the traumas Arab Muslims inflicted on Africans through trans-Sahara, and oriental slavery, castrations, and genocides of Black Africans, should not lead to the development of antagonistic attitude towards descendants of those who then considered Africans as inferior and unworthy of dignity.

The future of our common humanity must rest on reconciliation and the embrace of the universality of the human family. The acceptance of

other people's genuine humanity, which is more than tolerance, will secure a better future for all.

It is a core tenet of religions that there is one humanity. The pitfall of populism is the loss of the vision of one human family. There is therefore an urgent need for a genuine and legitimate humanizing mission of bringing the human family together. Populisms tainted with tribalism, nationalism, racism work against this coming together even in the dignity of difference but also in the unity and solidarity of the whole human race. There is one human race.

This solidarity shows in the respect of the physical and emotional integrity of every person. What it means to be human is inseparably connected to relinquishing and renunciation of violence, for violence against human beings saps and negates their dignity.

This respect for others is based on a Theo-anthropocentric vision of human beings whereby humans are created in the image of God and endowed with infinite dignity.

The Vienna Convention's conception of the interdependence, interrelatedness, and indivisibility of all human rights finds a parallel in the incontrovertible connection between freedom of religion or belief and a holistic understanding of human nature.

Faith-based organizations or religions have a destiny with history. If only we remain true to our various scriptures, upholding human dignity above the instrumentalization of other members of the human family, if only we affirm the sacredness of humans above places or objects, if only we deeply respected the inner sanctuary of every person that is one's conscience, humanity will be at a better place.

If we embraced these benevolent dispositions towards every person, the world would become what it is meant to be: a place of freedom, justice, peace, and fellowship for the whole human family in the dignity of difference.