

Public Prayer and the New Political Misuse of Religion within Western Christianity in Central Europe

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Summary

The following text conducts a conceptual analysis of new misuses of religion for political purposes within Western Christianity in Central Europe. The primary objective is to present a conceptual understanding and analysis of this phenomenon, considering both quantitative and qualitative research already conducted. The analysis reveals a paradox wherein the misuse is deemed both unsuccessful and successful. The paradox unfolds as unsuccessful predominantly among the majority of Christians in Europe, especially when compared to its successful counterparts in Orthodox Christianity (e.g., in Russia) and Islam (in Europe). Notably, the success of misuse is more pronounced among Central and Eastern European Christians than among Western European Christians. Numerous exceptions contribute to this paradox, including a positive correlation between Christians and far-right parties, and instances of public prayer at state borders, town squares, and near abortion clinics. This pattern is particularly pronounced in regions with a higher prevalence of Roman Catholics than Protestants. The author presents a basic explication of why these misuses appear or are attempted, and are only minimally or mildly successful, namely, because of the strong posed by democracy, free market, and rule of law.

Keywords: *misuse of religion; Western Christianity; Roman Catholics; Protestants; far-right parties; praying in public*

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It is often said that a new religion brands the gods of the old one as devils. But in reality they have presumably by that time already become devils.

Wittgenstein, 1998, 23

And when you pray, do not imitate the hypocrites: they love to say their prayers standing up in the synagogues and at the street corners for people to see them.” “But when you pray, go to your private room and, when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.

Mathew 6:5–6

Introduction

This research explores the new (contemporary) misuses of religion for political ends within Western Christianity in Europe.

(1) The research question is: are at least some misuses (their phenomena, examples, and cases) of religion for political ends within Western Christianity in Europe in the last 30 years or so, real or not, and furthermore, are they successful or not? (In the case of public prayer — since there is insufficient scientific research on the topic — this analysis must avail itself of many non-scientific sources such as newspaper articles, columns, commentaries, etc.)

As we take a glance at the timeline since 1989 — roughly the past 30 years — we see a more or less robust democratic system of government in place in Europe. This holds true especially within the EU and extends beyond its borders to countries such as the UK, Norway, Switzerland, and the like. It is crucial to note that the prevalence of significant (stronger phenomena) misuses of religion for political purposes is off the table during this period. However, there are instances of religion being exploited for religious aims, as seen in the emergence of anti-Semitism in the EU in 2023, championed by pro-Palestinian protesters and genuine European anti-Semites. Yet, we will not be looking into historical misuses or misuses outside of Europe, such as in the USA, in Russian, or other Orthodox churches, and in Islam, for these will be treated elsewhere. The focus remains on Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in Europe, specifically over the last 30 years or so (see Svenungsson, 2019).

(1.1) What remains are the weaker phenomena of the misuse of religion. Among them, we find the manoeuvres of various populist political and right-wing parties (see DeHanas & Shterin, 2018). These parties often engage with Roman Catholic voters, or at least make the attempt to do so. Far-right political parties champion the idea of restoring Christian identity and a Christian Europe (see Wolkenstein, 2022; Süßmann 2023).

The general structure of the analysis (given is the number of remarks) is as follows:

(1) → (1.1) (1.2) (1.3)	(The research question, issue, and its limitations)
↓	
(2)	(Conceptual analysis)
↓	
→ (2.1) (2.2) (2.3) (2.4) (2.5)	(Part 1: General far–right and misuse)
→ (2.6) (2.7) (2.8)	(Part 2: The case of street prayer and its misuse)
↓	
(3) → (3.1) (3.2) (3.3) (3.4)	(Conclusion)

Examples of such parties include the Swiss People’s Party in Switzerland, Brothers of Italy in Italy (see Evolvi, 2022), Fidesz in Hungary (see Fitzgerald, 2019; Scott, 2022), the United Right in Poland, Finns Party in Finland, and more. Examples of public actions include e.g. praying in public, primarily by Roman Catholics in the EU, which is no longer an uncommon sight and is intertwined with certain Christian and far–right political parties. This trend can be observed in countries like Poland, France, the Netherlands (see Greene, 2020), Belgium, Croatia, and others. Some of these weaker phenomena will be analyzed in this text.

This text specifically avoids delving into the misuse of politics for religious ends, or the use of politics for religious purposes. While undoubtedly a significant topic (considering the manipulation and utilization of Catholicism to amass political power for the propagation of religion) it is not the focus here. Religions with a conquest mindset, aiming to spread globally and convert all peoples, such as Christianity and Islam, often carry a robust missionary purpose. This text looks exclusively into the misuses of religion for political ends. Now, let us unpack this somewhat. There are two sides to this coin. On the one hand, it can be a manipulation wherein religion is misused for ostensibly political purposes, but in reality, the true goals are religious, and politics becomes a mere tool, not the actual objective.

(1.2) On the flip side, it can be a genuine misuse for political gain — think power grabs, pushing a supposedly religious agenda that is often more secular than sacred, and other political shenanigans. This second form is precisely what we are dissecting here. Interestingly, or perhaps not–so–interestingly, in certain cases, this type of misuse tends to cosy up with undemocratic antics like dodgy procedures, questionable laws, political decisions that raise eyebrows, election trickery, and a sprinkle of corruption among politicians.

Table 1. Topic of the present research into the genuine misuse of religion for non-religious purposes (by the author)

Tablica 1. Tema trenutačnoga istraživanja izvorne zloporabe religije u ne-religijske svrhe (izradio autor).

Genuine misuse of religion	For religious purposes	For non-religious purposes
By religious (clergy, formal and closed church organizations, believers, Christian NGOs, etc.)	–	+
By non-religious (government, legislative, judiciary, businessmen, ideologists, propagandists, etc.)	–	+
Examples of purposes	Intra— and inter-religious wars, etc.	Ideological, political, economic, military, etc.

It seems that what has been said so far is sufficient for what will be the topic here (as shown in *Table 1* given in Italics in the right column), but something should be said about what will not be the topic, given the numerous possibilities of misinterpreting the present subject matter.

To avoid any confusion, let us break down the concepts related to all five elements of our discussion. We shall make sure things are crystal clear for our present purposes.

(1.3) Concerning all five elements, namely, misuse, religious misuse, new misuses, political purposes, and Western Christianity of Europe we will clarify what is meant by them, and more importantly, what is not meant.

Misuse: From here on out, the term “misuse” (alternatively referred to as abuse, corruption, exploitation, maltreatment, mistreatment, etc.) will be tackled in its conventional sense. In simpler terms, we are talking about using something in the wrong way or for the wrong purpose. It could involve employing something in an unsuitable manner or deviating from its intended use. This might manifest as improper or excessive use, altering the inherent purpose or function of something, or wielding a good, substance, privilege, or right in ways not envisaged or intended (legally speaking).

Religious misuse vs. religious abuse: Let us clarify the distinction between religious misuse and religious abuse: Religious abuse »encompasses a broader range of actions administered through religion. It includes various forms of harassment, humiliation, and even psychological trauma. This term covers not only the misuse of religion for selfish, secular, or ideological ends but extends to individual psychological and physical abuse of believers, even of a private nature (e.g., sexual abuse), not necessarily limited to public aspects (e.g., economic, political, ideological, worldview, etc.)« (Wright, 2001). Religious misuse, a subset of

religious abuse, involves »characteristics such as manipulation, control, elitism, rigidity, persecution of outside criticism, suppression of criticism of leaders, forced conversion, and more« (Enroth, 1992). In the context of this text, we specifically address religious misuse for political purposes, where religion is exploited for secular ends. This interpretation focuses on the intersection of characteristics related to spiritual abuse and the abuse of religion for non-religious goals, creating a space for the misuse of religion for political objectives.

New misuses: The title of this research, *New Misuses*, presupposes the existence of old misuses. In this context, “new misuses” refers to those instances of misuse that have emerged since 1989, coinciding with the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. During this period, the Catholic Church, along with the Reformed Churches and Orthodox Christianity, returned to public life in these European countries. Despite the focus on new misuses, it is essential to provide a brief overview of old misuses of religion for political purposes, particularly those pre-dating 1989 and extending further back in history (e.g., since the Reconquista, the Crusades, the Wars of the Reformation, etc.).

Political purposes: The political purpose of the misuse of religion encompasses various phenomena that share the common trait of either blurring or openly violating the principle of the separation of church (religion, spiritual life of private citizens) and state (the public sphere of societal life). These phenomena can vary in intensity, ranging from weaker to stronger manifestations. Weaker instances include the misuse of religion to acquire votes in democratic elections and leveraging religious themes to influence discussions about the public and general welfare of the community. On the other hand, stronger manifestations involve the misuse of religion to establish the superiority of believers and the discrimination of non-believers (atheists) within a given society. This may be employed to secure political, economic, and legal advantages for believers over non-believers or for adherents of one religion over those of other religions within a particular societal context.

Western Christianity and Europe: In the context of this research, “the Western Christianity of Europe” refers to the traditional division in the classical sense concerning Europe. It encompasses the Roman Catholic Church and the churches that originated after the Protestant Reformation in Europe. Excluded from this category are the churches of Eastern Christianity, namely the Assyrian Church of the East, Oriental Orthodox Churches, and Eastern Orthodox Churches. The only exception to this exclusion is the Greek Catholic Church, which shares closer ties with the Roman Catholic Church than with the Orthodox Churches. Protestant Reformed Churches include Anabaptism, Calvinism, Anglicanism, and Lutheranism, as well as all churches that emerged through schisms within these churches (such as Pentecostalism, Adventism, Baptism, Presbyterianism, Continental Reformed Churches, Congregationalism, Puritanism, Quakers, Methodism, Pietism, etc.), provided they are present in Europe.

Therefore, in the aforementioned sense, the present research is concerned with new misuses of religion for political ends within Western Christianity in

Europe, and not with old misuses (only since 1989), misuses of religion for political purposes, and not politics for religious purposes (or religion for religious purposes), within Western Christianity, and not in Orthodox Christianity, nor in Islam, etc. in roughly the last 30 years or so.

1. New misuses of religion for political purposes in Western Christianity in Europe: Far-right populists and their misuse of Christianity

1.1. How Christian is Europe in reality?

The initial issue at hand is: How Christian is Europe in reality? Europe is dominantly Christian, with Southern and Central Europe being dominantly Roman Catholic, North-western Europe being mixed or predominantly Protestant, and South-eastern Europe (from Greece to Ukraine) having a small percentage of Orthodox Christianity (see Starr, 2018). Nevertheless, Europe is also dominantly secular. Therefore, the question arises as to the sense in which Europe can be considered dominantly Christian and secular (see Roy, 2019; Driessen, 2020).

(2) There are differences in religious perspectives, specifically, Catholics in Western Europe exhibit lower church attendance, hold less socially conservative views, and display greater acceptance of Muslims compared to their counterparts in Central and Eastern Europe (see Starr, 2018). Additionally, Catholics in Western Europe tend to be more cautious about any association between Catholicism and ideology, politics, and similar matters, whereas such suspicion is absent among Catholics in Central and Eastern Europe (who do not perceive it as a problem). In the secular perspective, differences exist as well; various European countries exhibit distinct levels of separation between the church and the state (see Hall, 2023).

These disparities create ample room for the misuse of religion for non-religious purposes. Such misuse may originate from either the religion itself, from political entities or both, with non-religious purposes encompassing ideological, political, economic, or even militant objectives, and sometimes extending to legal realms.

Excuse: Misuse of religion in other religions and regions. Since the scope of the present research is limited to Europe and does not encompass other regions with Christian churches, it could be important to include a concise note about misuses outside of Europe, with a particular focus on examples from the United States (also in the same period 1990–2023 since there may be some relevant relations; see Eck, 2002; Hulsether, 2007; Wald & Calhoun-Brown, 2011; Miller, 2022). However, the situation in the United States is quite specific due to various reasons and historical, and contemporary circumstances. Nevertheless, the misuse of Christianity for political purposes by politics as well as by religion is also evident there. As said, since the research is restricted to Western Christianity in Central Europe, Eastern Christianity as well as Islam are excluded.

Specific considerations regarding the misuse of religion for political and military purposes in Russian Orthodoxy and Islam will not be discussed here although they are part of the European religious landscape (for Russian Orthodoxy see Krkač, 2022; 2023). However, similar misuses appear in Hinduism (India), Buddhism (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Mongolia, Japan etc.), and even in atheism (China), (see Braibanti, 1947; Deegalle, 2009; Dias, 2015; Dubus, 2018; Seprényi, 2022; Nagvanshi, 2023). Although the situation of misuse of religion for political purposes can be quite different in Hinduism, Buddhism (and within Buddhism, e.g. in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Japan; misuse of religion for political purposes in atheist countries, e.g. China is a specific case, but surprisingly enough, it is present there as well), and other Far East religions, it most certainly shows the basic pattern of misuse in terms of misusing religion by religion and politics for various political purposes. The success of such misuses depends on the strength of democracy, free-market, and rule of law in these countries, and in this way can be closer to more successful misuse as in Russian Orthodoxy and Islam, or closer to less successful misuse as in European Western Christianity (Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Anglicanism).

1.2. The political far-right and its failed attempt to misuse religion for political purposes

The second inquiry pertains to the connection between the existence of far-right and populist parties in the European Union, considering their notable influence in both national and continental politics. These parties often assert themselves as champions of Christian identity and Christian Europe. The crucial aspect of this question involves understanding the reactions of Christian believers and clergy within Christian churches to such claims. In their 2015 paper titled *Explaining the Religion Gap in Support for Radical Right Parties in Europe*, K. A. Montgomery and R. Winter elucidate this relationship as generally negative. While they acknowledged Poland as an exception, it is noteworthy to mention that this exception may no longer be applicable in 2023 (see Strømme & Schmiedel, 2020a; 2020b).

(2.1) »Across Europe populist radical right (PRR) parties advertise themselves as defenders of Christian identity and values, but they do not seem to strongly attract religious Christian voters. This article tests a general framework for understanding this religion gap in 13 countries. Findings extend earlier research on religiosity and radical right attitudes, provide insight on East–West differences in the PRR phenomenon, and lend conditional support to the notion of a “vaccine effect” suggested by prior research« (Montgomery & Winter, 2015).

K. Marcinkiewicz and R. Dassonneville reach similar conclusions in their 2021 research titled *Do religious voters support populist radical right parties? Opposite effects in Western and East–Central Europe*. They provide a summary as follows:

(2.2) »The rise of populist radical right parties fuels a discussion about the roots of their success. Existing research has demonstrated the relevance of gender, education and income for explaining the far-right vote. The present study

contributes to the aforementioned debate by focusing on the role of religiosity. The data collected in the eighth round of the European Social Survey (2016) allow examining in more detail the political relevance of attendance at religious services and other measures of religious devotion. This study focuses in particular on 15 countries, 11 from Western Europe and 4 from East–Central Europe. In none of the Western European countries is there evidence of a positive relationship between religiosity and the vote for a populist radical right party. In fact, in many countries of this region more religious voters are substantively less inclined to support far-right movements. The situation is different in parts of East–Central Europe. In Poland and to a weaker extent also in Hungary, the probability of vote for right-wing populists increases with religiosity« (Marcinkiewicz & Dassonneville, 2021).

In principle, European far-right populists attempt to exploit religion, but the majority of Christians — likely more in Western Europe and somewhat less in Central and Eastern European countries — do not align with these efforts and do not lend their support in elections. Nevertheless, certain radical cases pose a significant paradox (as elucidated in Strømme and Schmiedel, 2020b).

(2.3) »For the far right, people are trapped by their religions. It's not them choosing 'their' religion, but 'their' religion choosing them — and all that comes with it. The consequence is clear. Far-right terrorist Anders Behring Breivik, who killed seventy-seven people in Norway in 2011, saw himself as 'a supporter of a monocultural Christian Europe'. In his warped worldview, the people he killed had aided and abetted the 'Islamisation' of Europe. But the theological trap of new racism can be found in far less extreme forms and far less explicit formats« (Strømme & Schmiedel, 2020b).

1.3. Why far-right attempts to misuse Christianity for political purposes in Europe is not too successful (so far)?

The final question revolves around the validity of the two aforementioned points and whether there are instances of politics, particularly from the far-right, misusing religion for non-religious purposes such as political, legal, and economic.

(2.4) The principled answer suggests that such misuse does exist. However, it appears that this misuse has not proven effective, or has failed, or is generally unsuccessful. Several factors contribute to this apparent lack of success: General demographic values: Variables such as sex, age, vocation, level of education, and specific knowledge of a particular religion and denomination (including beliefs, sacred texts, dogmas, and basic theology). Cultural attitudes of Christian believers: There is a tendency among Christian believers to exercise caution when it comes to the intersection of politics and religion. Political-economic attitudes of Christian believers: Their alignment tends to be more towards Christian democrat or conservative parties rather than far-right parties (within the scope and limits given by democracy, free-market, and the rule of law). The secular nature of Europe and its member states: The commitment to defending freedom of religion while simultaneously upholding human rights and the rights of citizens. Christian teaching and clergy: Past instances of misuse have made believers

extremely cautious and conscious, deterring any new attempts of misuse by external political radical forces.

These factors collectively contribute to the apparent ineffectiveness of attempts to misuse religion for non-religious purposes in European political contexts. Some of these points have been substantiated through quantitative research, while others may serve as hypotheses for future investigations. The underlying intuition suggests that it is exceedingly challenging to manipulate European Western Christians for political purposes by political parties and clergy, especially when compared to Orthodox Christians, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church, or European Muslims. It is crucial not to underestimate the potential influence of financing European far-right movements by Russia and Islamist organizations (refer to Polyakova, 2014; Beitāne, 2015; Pantucci, 2023).

(2.5) Yet, a paradox appears to exist. In essence, the majority of European Western Christians cannot be easily coerced into serving someone else’s non-religious political agenda through the misuse of their religion. This holds particularly true for Western European Christians when contrasted with Central and Eastern European Christians. The significance of the latter point becomes apparent when considering the numerous exceptions to the general principle that occur among Central and Eastern European Christians, particularly in countries where their percentage, mostly Roman-Catholics, varies between 60% and 90% (as indicated in *Table 2*, highlighted in bold in the three bottom lines).

Section delved into a principled question and its corresponding principled answer. However, a comprehensive understanding of the answer requires a brief acknowledgment of the cases as a series of exceptions. These exceptions, in reality, challenge the principled answer, as they demonstrate that a certain subset of believers, at a particular level of radicalization, is indeed successfully manipulated for political purposes by various far-right political parties and members of the clergy.

Table 2. Genuine attempts to misuse religion for political purposes in Western Christianity in Europe since 1990. Source: summarized by the author from: Morieson, 2021; Liger & Gutheil, 2022.

Tablica 2. Izvorni pokušaji zlorabe religije u političke svrhe u zapadnom kršćanstvu u Europi od 1990. godine. Izvor: sažeto od strane autora prema: Morieson, 2021; Liger & Gutheil, 2022.

Genuine attempts to misuse religion for political purposes in Western Christianity in Europe since 1990	For non-religious purposes	
	Ideological, political	Demographic, economic, military, etc.
By religious (clergy, believers, etc.)	Particular members of clergy, groups of believers within the church	Groups of believers, religious NGOs closely connected to parts of the clergy

By non-religious (government, legislative, judiciary, businessmen, ideologists, propagandists, etc.		Particular far-right political parties, representatives of governments, various NGOs, parapolitical, and extremist movements, etc.	
Examples of purposes		Defending Christian identity, and Christian Europe (ideological), winning national and/or European elections (political), etc.	Strong and rigid anti-immigrant policies (demographic), including army on borders (militant), anti-Muslim immigration (demographic), restrictions on economic immigration (economic), etc.
Actions		Christian-nationalist ideology in party programs, winning elections, discriminatory actions, laws and regulations, etc.	Public prayer, religious protests, and anti-protests, religious right-wing extremism, etc.
Probable success	North-West	Low	Low
	Central-East	Medium	Medium
	Europe total	Low to medium	Low to medium

2. *The case of street prayer and misuse of Christianity*

2.1. *Types of public prayer*

On the one hand, praying in public by Christians in Europe is not a common practice. Exceptions may include various yearly processions, religious holidays, or celebrations honouring saints associated with towns or regions. Typically, prayer is reserved for religious services, specific places such as churches, and designated times of the day, week, month, or year.

On the other hand, praying in public by non-Christians in Western Europe is not completely uncommon, particularly in the UK and other countries like France and Germany. As expressed by Meotti (2018), »Public prayer is not a normal manifestation of the legitimate Western freedom of worship. Through these public events, some extremist Muslims seem to be presenting an alternative to Europe's secularism.« This phenomenon raises concerns about the potential misuse of religion for political purposes. In certain countries, such as France, measures have been taken to prohibit this practice (see Moore, 2017).

Additionally, a novel phenomenon is emerging: praying in public by Catholics in various places and on various occasions. These include praying in the vicinity of abortion facilities, praying for different purposes on town squares, and praying on state borders with anti-immigrant sentiments, among other instances (refer to Anon., 2017). It can be hypothesized that some of these practices may have been imported from the United States or Western Europe.

Certain prayers hold a unique significance, such as those conducted on the Polish border or prayers for Ukraine. Meanwhile, others are observed regularly on a monthly basis. The diversity of these practices is notable, with some being specific to certain countries and others being widespread. For instance, the tradition of monthly street prayers every first Saturday of the month is observed in numerous towns across Poland, Hungary, Croatia, and other locations by hundreds of believers (Golańska–Bault, 2002). This phenomenon warrants description, but before delving into it, it is essential to provide a context in which such practices might appear normal.

2.2. The context of street prayer every first Saturday of the month (Poland)

Street prayer every first Saturday of the month constitutes the longest-standing new religious phenomenon among Roman Catholics in Central Europe, observed in many towns across several countries, including Poland, Hungary, Croatia, and others. To better comprehend this practice, it is pertinent to explore its potential connections with far-right political parties.

Numerous suspicions suggest that these prayer groups are closely linked to conservative and far-right political parties (see Kotwas & Kubik, 2019; Mazzini 2022; Kozłowska & Dyjuk, 2023; Chrostowski, 2023). In his comprehensive study titled *Unholy Alliance: Identification and prevention of ideological and religious frames between right-wing populism and Christianity in Poland*, Chrostowski begins with a highly informative abstract:

(2.6) »Since 2015, power in Poland has been exercised by the right-wing populist coalition, led by the socially conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party. The deconfliction mark of these governments became the ‘unholy alliance’ with Christianity, which was a movement that used populist manipulation based on exacerbating social dichotomy, campaigning against the LGBT community, nationalism, xenophobia, attitudes of rejection, anti-pluralism and anti-establishment. In this context, the aim of this article is to theoretically analyze the ideological and religious frames between right-wing populism and Christianity in Poland. The considerations begin with the presentation of the theoretical background, that is, the relationship that exists between the populist ‘thin-core ideology’ and Christianity within the framework of ideological appropriation of religion by populists. Furthermore, the author will make an attempt to decipher mutual influences and seek answers to the question: How did PiS ‘hijack’ the Catholic Church in Poland? The next step will present a comparative identification of convergent and divergent frameworks between right-wing populists and the Catholic Church in

Poland. Finally, the article will outline indications for the socio–pastoral prevention of populism and a summary of the main results« (Chrostowski, 2023, 321).

Chrostowski provides a detailed description and explanation of the conditions and procedures that underlie the strong relationship between Catholicism and right–wing populism. A central aspect of this robust connection is the sacralization of policy:

(2.7) »It should also be remembered that the sacralisation of policy also plays an important role in this respect (Rouhana and Shalhoub–Kevorkian 2021). The aim of this phenomenon is to create a specific religious framework around political activity, for example: supporters of a given party are representatives of good, while opponents will identify themselves with evil; a political leader assumes the role of a charismatic clergyman who leads the people to the ‘promised land’ (Zúquete 2017; Mancini and Rosenfeld 2020; Chrostowski 2021b)« (Chrostowski 2023, 325–326).

However, the emergence of this phenomenon of mutual relationship is attributed to various events. Many experts point to a series of scandals within the Polish Catholic Church, which likely led to a significant decline in believers in Poland. Chrostowski suggests that the PiS party hijacked the Catholic Church in Poland, and some members of the church actively facilitated this hijacking. This insight is crucial for understanding the model because the misuse of religion for political purposes requires not only political forces but also active involvement of religious forces (as well as the »silence of the majority of church people«, as noted by Chrostowski (2023, 328). In this context, street prayers every first Saturday of the month should be seen and understood as one element in a series of various activities that strengthen the relationship between right–wing populism and Catholicism — a relationship in which neither politics nor religion is deemed innocent.

2.3. *The case of street prayer for “men to be spiritual authorities in family” (Croatia)*

Let us explore an intriguing aspect of the phenomenon of street prayers every first Saturday of the month, not in Poland but in Croatia, particularly in Zagreb. Setting aside the individuals who engage in these prayers on Jelačić Square in Zagreb, questions arise as to why on the Main Square, why Saturday morning, why only men are among them, and so forth. In a democratic society, individuals are free to engage in public activities as long as it does not impede others or violate any laws. The debate over whether they should engage in such practices, given the abundance of religious spaces and designated times for prayer in Croatia, including churches, shrines, processions, and other religious events in public spaces, raises another set of considerations. This includes reflection on whether participants are mindful of what Jesus taught about praying in the streets vs. in private (see Matthew 6:5–6), among other factors.

(2.8) Let us look into a specific aspect of their prayer: the desire for »men to be spiritual authorities in the family« (M.G., 2022, for defence see Uredništvo,

2023, for criticism see Kašić, 2023). This request is particular as it focuses on men — adult individuals of the male gender — to hold authoritative roles, specifically in spiritual matters within the family context. This specificity eliminates ambiguity about their plea to God. What they are praying for is clear. However, examining the content of this prayer raises, if not theological then most certainly historical questions. Perhaps the concept of spiritual authority is the most important.

The preciseness of the prayer reveals the desire for men to be spiritual authorities in the family: the distinction is made between spiritual authority and other forms of influence such as material, social, educational, or cultural authority within the family unit—typically comprising close relatives, including parents and children. Yet, upon analyzing this prayer, theological concerns arise regarding its alignment with biblical teachings. For instance, the verse from Galatians 3:28 states, »There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.« This passage challenges the idea of distinct roles based on sex or gender within the spiritual realm, suggesting a unity and equality among believers regardless of sex or gender.

The concept: The concept of spiritual authority, rooted in the Latin word *spiritus* meaning breath, contains various meanings. In its fundamental sense, it pertains to the conscious, mental, or cognitive realm; in a secondary sense, it signifies the dominant mood or characteristic of a period (e.g., the spirit of the times). It extends further to non-material beings, entities with supernatural powers (such as spirits, apparitions, or ghosts), and ultimately serves as a synonym for religiosity in general or specific forms of religiosity, i.e. spirituality. Within Christianity, spiritual authorities, in a narrower sense, encompass God, Jesus, angels, saints, and priests. In a broader sense, this can also include monks, spiritual leaders, and every individual Christian. In the context of the men who pray at Jelačić Square in Zagreb, they are likely seeking to be spiritual authorities in the broader sense. Presuming they do not exclude themselves, their prayer essentially seeks to be recognized as spiritual authorities in their families, presumably their own.

The emergence: The emergence of spirituality and spiritual authority is intriguing, particularly as it originated not in the official hierarchy of the church but within early monasticism, notably in the asceticism of Egypt. It is worth noting that the roots of spiritual authority in Christianity can be traced back to the desert fathers, which was not limited to men only (referred to as father or *abba*), but also included women (referred to as mother or *amma*). Historically, tensions arose between religious ascetics and the authority of bishops overseeing their dioceses in terms of their way of life. However, the correctness of their doctrine was officially recognized as early as the 6th century (Latin: *cum omni honore suscipimus*), and all desert fathers were proclaimed *patres* (fathers) even though they were never formally ordained. In more recent times, spiritual authority has evolved in various forms. It can be found in charismatic leaders, theologians, authors, and figures that hold considerable influence in guiding spiritual thought and practices. These modern spiritual authorities may not be bound by traditi-

onal hierarchies but can emerge from diverse backgrounds and expressions of faith.

The change: Subsequently, the influence of desert dwellers waned as monks in monasteries, who adhered to monastic rules from the 6th century onward, took precedence. Due to the relatively closed nature of monasteries, confessors assumed the role of spiritual advisors. About a millennium later, the emergence of Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises, developed between 1522 and 1540, gave rise to a new school of spiritual guidance. While spiritual authority was ascribed to the desert fathers, it differed from a sense of spiritual superiority or power over others; rather, it reflected a role as spiritual guides, offering assistance to that in need. In this assistance, they appeared guided by what was later known as kenosis Christology, which viewed Jesus as one who spiritually serves others rather than possessing spiritual superiority over them. Initially, women served as spiritual authorities on an equal footing with men, displaying charismatic qualities, with sex or gender differences being irrelevant.

Consequences and the contemporary state: Evolution from this point to the situation today where women, for instance in Roman Catholicism, cannot be priests but only nuns — though they can be recognized as saints — is a lengthy narrative not central to the current discussion. Presently, spiritual authority outside the church hierarchy is often attributed to individuals inclined toward various forms of meditative activities. These individuals, who may have mystical experiences, are generally perceived as religious enthusiasts, often stemming, at least partially, from dissatisfaction with the spirituality offered by the hierarchy of the church (confessors, parish priests, bishops, etc.). The contemporary discourse on spiritual authority can be distilled into two main facets: the individual internal guidance by the Holy Spirit experienced by various mystics, charismatic, and the like, on the one hand, and the collective external guidance provided by the teachings of the Catholic Church, on the other. In the context of the men who are praying on Jelačić Square in Zagreb, specifically desiring that men (and not women) be spiritual authorities in the family (as opposed to, for instance, the local community or parish), the official church response is characterized by either silence or modest objection (echoing the previous quote by Chrostowski). This response often invokes references to the New Testament as a basis for its stance, but other than that there is no reasonable continuation and judgment on the practice.

However, statistical data indicate that within families, women tend to be more religious than men (see Trzebiatowska & Bruce, 2012). Moreover, research suggests that children in families receive their religiosity to a greater extent from women than from men (see Graham, 2016). In light of these findings, it would be intriguing to reconsider the narrative of the role of women in Christianity — from figures like Mary and Magdalene onwards — and share this perspective with men who are praying for spiritual authority in the family. This prayer appears, at least from a religious, theological, and potentially spiritual standpoint, to be questionable. The underlying notion here is to illustrate those instances of

mutual misuse of religion for political purposes, involving both politics and religion, entail dubious religious interpretations or bypassing of the common reading of important passages in sacred texts.

Table 3. Genuine attempts to misuse religion for political purposes in Western Christianity in Europe since 1990 with selected actions, objections, and probable success (by the author).

Tablica 3. Izvorni pokušaji zlorabe religije u političke svrhe u zapadnom kršćanstvu u Europi od 1990. godine s odabranim postupcima, prigovorima i vjerojatnim izvorima (izradio autor).

Genuine attempts to misuse religion for political purposes in Western Christianity in Europe since 1990		By politics (politicians, government, parliament, judiciary, and politics dependent businesses) and by religion (clergy, priests, various religious movements, and informal groups of believers)	
Selected actions		Christian–nationalist and/or right–wing ideology in party programs, winning elections, discriminatory actions, laws and regulations, etc.	Praying in public, religious protests, and anti–protests, religious right–wing extremism, etc.
Objections		Lowering democratic standards, anti–democratic, authoritarian attempts, perhaps violating some encyclical teachings, etc.	Extreme reading of Bible, disregard of various levels of official Catholic teaching, etc.
Probable success	North–West	Low	Low
	Central–East	Medium	Medium
	Europe total	Low to medium	Low to medium

Conclusion

Let us return to the initial focus of this research, which looks into the contemporary misuses of religion for political ends within Western Christianity in Europe over the past 30 years or so. The primary research question aimed to ascertain whether some of these instances, their phenomena, and examples indeed constitute real cases of misuse of religion for political purposes. Additionally,

the inquiry sought to determine the success or lack thereof of these cases and to identify any paradoxical dynamics between different instances.

(3) In addressing this question, it is crucial to distinguish between a principal and a general answer and responses at the level of specific cases. While only one case — praying in public — was explored in a little more detail, the findings can be extrapolated to similar instances of public prayer and potentially to other activities that appear suspicious as a form of religious misuse for political purposes.

(3.1) The general answer is affirmative: there are misuses occurring on all levels and involving various perpetrators. When considering the purposes behind these misuses, they extend beyond religious aims to encompass non-religious or political motives, such as ideological, political, and economic purposes (as shown in Table 1). Additionally, it can be hypothesized that both religious and non-religious perpetrators engage in these misuses.

(3.2) The specific answer in regard to particular actions with non-religious or political purposes is also affirmative. Misuses are manifested in terms of ideology evident in party programs, electoral strategies, various forms of protests, anti-protests, and, notably, specific instances of praying in public (as shown in Table 2). Therefore, instances of misuse do exist, and they indicate attempts at manipulation.

(3.3) The success of these misuses, however, is debatable. On regional levels, success tends to be moderate to low, and on the continental level, it ranges from low to medium. Therefore, in terms of overall outcomes, these misuses, while potentially effective in certain periods and countries, do not demonstrate significant success on the regional and continental scale (though there is the possibility of increased success in the future) (as shown in Table 2). Examining specific cases of misuse, at least in one instance — praying in public — the attempts and results appear similar (as shown in Table 3).

The existence of attempts to misuse religion for political purposes by both political and religious entities, along with their limited success, can be elucidated by various societal phenomena. These societies are fundamentally democratic, characterized by a free-market economy and the rule of law. In countries where these features are more prominent (in the Northwest), misuses tend to be less successful. Conversely, in countries where these features are less pronounced (in Central-East), misuses achieve only moderate success. General demographic features across the entire EU, as well as specific characteristics of individual countries (such as Poland, Croatia, etc.), further contribute to the explanation.

(3.4) The primary explanation lies in the fact that the foundations of democracy, free markets, and the rule of law are generally strong in the EU, serving as a substantial barrier against more extensive misuses and their greater success. When comparing misuses of Western Christianity for political purposes in Europe with, for example, the misuses of Orthodox Christianity in Russia or Islam in certain Muslim countries (such as Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, but also in some European countries) a clear distinction emerges. In these countries, the barriers are not as formidable in terms of democratic, free-market, and

rule-of-law foundations at the political end, but there is also no formal hierarchy in religion which would preserve at least some common teachings and criticize extreme interpretations.

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Nove zloporabe religije u političke svrhe u zapadnom kršćanstvu u Europi s primjerom javne molitve

Kristijan Krkač*

Sažetak

Sljedeći tekst provodi konceptualnu analizu novih zloporaba vjere u političke svrhe unutar zapadnoga kršćanstva u Europi. Primarni je cilj predstaviti konceptualno razumijevanje i analizu toga fenomena s obzirom na već provedena kvantitativna i kvalitativna istraživanja. Analiza otkriva paradoks u kojem se zloporaba smatra i neuspješnom i uspješnom. Paradoks se razvija kao neuspješan pretežno među većinom kršćana u Europi, posebno u usporedbi s njegovim uspješnim paralelama u pravoslavnom kršćanstvu (primjerice u Rusiji) i islamu (u Europi). Primjetno je da je uspjeh zloporabe izraženiji među kršćanima srednje i istočne Europe nego među kršćanima zapadne Europe. Brojne iznimke pridonose tomu paradoksu, uključujući pozitivnu korelaciju između kršćana i stranaka krajnje desnice, te slučajeve javne molitve na državnim granicama, gradskim trgovima i u blizini klinika za pobačaje. Taj je obrazac posebno izražen u regijama s većom zastupljenošću rimokatolika nego protestanata. Autor iznosi osnovno objašnjenje zašto se te zloporabe pojavljuju ili pokušavaju, a tek su minimalno ili blago uspješne, naime, zbog jake barijere u smislu demokracije, slobodnoga tržišta i vladavine prava.

Ključne riječi: zloporaba vjere; zapadno kršćanstvo; rimokatolici; protestanti; desne političke stranke; javna molitva

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