Religious Backgrounds of Illiberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT: In a few European countries, the idea of illiberal democracy is explicitly or at least implicitly outlined as a legitimate form of democratic governance, although it obviously threatens the rule of law in a democratic constitution at the same time. In this regard, political leaders use religion as a way to justify the aims of illiberal politics and, moreover, to provide a semblance of legitimacy to the idea and practice of illiberal democracy. To begin, this article locates the concept of illiberal democracy within the history of democratic theory and then clarifies why religion is basically predestined to serve as a vital source of illiberal programs and to give populist actors much more than an alibi for their implementation. Against this theoretical background, the empirical role religion plays in several contemporary Central and Eastern European democracies can be interpreted as both the result of religion's Janus face concerning democracy and as a consequence of the liberal-illiberal paradox of democracy itself.

KEYWORDS: Christianity, democratic antinomies, Hungary, illiberal democracy, Islam, liberal-illiberal paradox, religion, Poland, Slovakia.

1. Introduction

> *"[The] Hungarian nation is not a simple sum of individuals, but a community that needs to be organized, strengthened and developed, and in this sense, the new state that we are building is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not deny foundational values of liberalism, as freedom, etc. But it does not make this ideology a central element of state organization, but applies a specific, national, particular approach in its stead."[1]*

The illiberal and democratic state Victor Orbán had in mind when justifying his political program to pass central constitutional amendments and to bring the court system as well as the mass media under the control of the (Fidesz-dominated) parliament emphasizes the national character of every political community—in his case, the Hungarian one. In return, he denied such universal liberal values as individual rights, pluralism, freedom of movement, checks and balances, and the rule of law. At the same time, Orbán attempted to underline that

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[1] From Victor Orbán's speech at Băile Tuşnad in July 2014 (https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/) (15.12.2019).

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his political program does not contradict traditional principles of liberal democracy, including freedom, majority rule, and representation. The difference to the (universal) qualities of Western democracies is rather suggested as an inevitable result of the national (Hungarian) character shaping the rule of the people in Hungary in a distinctive and unmistakable manner.

Therefore, it was much more than a coincidence that Orbán expressed his illiberal political position in 2014 at Băile Tuşnad, which is located in Transylvania (Romania) and home to an enclave of ethnic Hungarians who were stranded there after the Treaty of Trianon (1920). The treaty formally ended World War I hostilities between the Entente powers and the new kingdom of Hungary; it regulated the independence of the Hungarian state and defined its borders. Even today, the treaty represents a huge trauma for the Hungarian nation, as the country lost about two thirds of its former territory and about half of its total population (around 60% of ethnic Hungarians). Consequently, the Treaty of Trianon has become a prime symbol for the popular perception in Hungary concerning how Western powers usually violate the democratic principle of national self-determination, ignore the processes of nation building, and create arbitrary borders in Central and Eastern Europe. In accordance with that, Orbán's speech about the state of the European Union in 2014 suggested a distinction between liberal values and institutions on the one hand and the principles of democracy on the other. According to his view, the Hungarian nation should keep its distance from liberal values, since they led to the great Western financial collapse of 2008, to drastic reductions in social programs over the previous decades, and to the typical kinds of injustice whenever the weak are dominated by the strong.

In 2018, again at Băile Tuşnad, where he gave a keynote speech at the 29th annual Balvanyos Summer University, Orbán renewed and tightened his critique by stressing that in Western European countries, "there is [only] liberalism but […] no democracy." Moreover, he blamed the European Commission for being biased "because it sides with the liberals" and acts against the (democratically authorized) interests of Central and Eastern Europe. As a legitimized alternative to Western liberalism and liberal democracy, Orbán now emphasized the idea of *Christian democracy*. According to his view, liberal democracy stands for multiculturalism, openness to immigration and a flexible definition of the family, whereas Christian democracy prioritizes Christian culture, anti-immigration and, the Christian family (including the principle that "every child has the right to a mother and a father").[2] Thus, every European country has the right and duty to protect its Christian culture, to defend its borders, and to reject the ideology of multiculturalism. Apart from that, Central and Eastern European countries had to replace their liberal elite with a Christian-democratic elite. Moreover, to strengthen the particular national identity of Hungary beyond its defined borders, the Hungarian government launched an economic development program encompassing the national community in Transylvania as well.

Together, Orbán's two manifestos at Băile Tuşnad show that he officially supports an illiberal *and* Christian version of democracy that is fundamentally opposed to the Western ideas of universalism and multiculturalism. This tension raises the question as to what kind of relationship the illiberal and Christian can have with democracy? Are illiberalism and Christianity two sides of the same coin? Are they two different political perspectives that both resist the Western style of liberalism? Do they imply a dialectically structured antagonism? Or perhaps a cause-effect-relation? To answer these questions, we must search for arguments that

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[2] https://hungarytoday.hu/orban-on-western-europe-there-is-liberalism-but-not-democracy/ (16.12.2019). See also Zerofsky 2019.

make it actually plausible to associate religion with illiberal thinking and to understand what Christian and illiberal approaches to politics may have in common.

Hence, the following issues require predominantly theoretical clarifications. Why do right-wing actors like Victor Orbán and others treat religion as an instrument to support their illiberal political objectives? How does this perspective fit with the universal claims of the Christian religion itself? And what makes the Christian religion both attractive and vulnerable to play such an important role within the framework of illiberal politics? To answer this, the paper starts with a discussion concerning the concept of illiberal democracy (section 2) and then analyzes to what extent religion serves as a vital resource for this concept (section 3). Finally, it demonstrates some of the empirical evidence for correlating illiberal and Christian perspectives in several countries in Central and Eastern Europe (section 4). Against this background, Orbán's position should not be understood as only being arbitrary and selective but as a comprehensible result of a long intellectual tradition. In sum, this paper tries to conceptualize linkages between classical religious patterns of thought and illiberal politics in modern democracy, before testing them along with contemporary political discourses and practices in three Central and Eastern European countries.[3]

Accordingly, the focus of this contribution is a genuine theoretical one and uses the empirical examples of Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia only for illustration purposes without any aspiration to present them as systematic case studies. Moreover, the argument should not be understood as a more or less typical liberal (or Western) critique of an authoritarian move within these countries. In contrast, it stresses the *liberal-illiberal paradox* of democracy itself and could, therefore, be used to examine the role religion plays in the illiberal turns happening in France (Bizeul 2018) or Italy (Schwörer 2018) as well.

2. What Is Illiberal Democracy?

The concept "illiberal democracy" was introduced by Fareed Zakaria (1997) in an article for *Foreign Affairs* and later in his book *The Future of Freedom* (Zakaria 2003). He used it to describe political communities that have more or less functioning electoral systems and working democratic reforms but evince a serious lack of core liberal institutions, such as individual rights, constitutionalism, checks and balances, and the rule of law, at the same time. As his main examples for such illiberal democracies, Zakaria focused on Russia and China but also on East European countries, such as Poland, Hungary, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, the Ukraine, Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan; African, Middle East and South Asian countries, such as Zambia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Senegal, Benin, Algeria, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Afghanistan and Pakistan; and Latin American countries, such as Venezuela, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, and Chile. He analyzed these countries regarding their respective historical and empirical "illiberal tendencies." According to Zakaria, this wide range of countries can be subsumed under the same analytical concept, as their illiberal approaches toward democracy share (and provoke) similar constitutional defects and, therefore, cultivate only pseudo-forms and pseudo-norms of democratic governance. However, the main problems with Zakaria's argument are not only that, in the end, too many obviously different countries are generalized in an oversimplified manner but that there is not even a clear distinction between the terms "antiliberal" and "illiberal." In this regard, we must distinguish strictly *antiliberal* politics, defined as oppression of liberal values and

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[3] Parts of the argument will be published in the volume *Illiberal Politics and Religion in Europe and Beyond* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus 2020) edited by Anja Hennig und Mirjam Weiberg-Salzmann.

institutions, from *illiberal* politics, which conceals opposition to the liberal-democratic order by instrumentalizing liberal codes of conduct, such as freedom of opinion, freedom of association, and freedom of religion, to implement illiberal aims and projects (Kramer & Kimball 1999; Berezin 2009; Hennig & Hidalgo 2020).

Hence, concerning the relationship between the liberal and the antiliberal, there is no dichotomy or no necessarily "either/or" relationship between illiberal politics and a liberal polity, since the first could authentically take place within the normative framework of the latter. Nonetheless, it must be said that the aims of illiberal politics could change the constitutional guarantees of such a liberal polity and, consequently, perpetuate and radicalize the illiberal character of the entire political system.

Thus, the idea of illiberal democracy confronts us with a serious intellectual challenge: Against Zakaria's ultimate suggestion that an illiberal democracy does not deserve to be called a democracy,[4] we have to concede that illiberal politics may keep a formal respect to the principles and institutions of liberal democracies, even though such illiberal politics and the politicians who wield them may attempt to abuse them for their own purposes.[5] Hence, from a democratic point of view, illiberal political positions cannot easily (or automatically) be defamed as being antiliberal or antidemocratic; rather, they reflect radical and particular outcomes of possibly legitimate democratic attitudes (even though they are very one sided). As a result, these illiberal positions can emerge within a pluralistic society as one legitimate position among others, which was predominately launched by dissidents to the (liberal) political mainstream order, or they can arise within a society shaped by an illiberal social mainstream as the eventually legitimate will of the majority. This means, it is much more difficult to refute the democratic character of illiberal political positions than many liberals assert. Although democracy obviously suffers whenever a majority with undemocratic underpinnings takes the political power and liquidates democracy by the application of democratic processes, the opposite position that claims to protect democracy from the people by banning radical political parties or restricting fundamental political rights obviously undermines democracy as well.[6] Until further notice, it is not clear why, for instance, an illiberal political party that runs the government by maintaining formal respect for the principles and institutions of a liberal and democratic polity must be interpreted as a risk to democracy. This rather unbiased understanding of illiberal democracy raises the question of democracy itself. In this respect, democracy may not necessarily be recognized as a uniquely defined political system but as a fairly open discursive framework. Following Hidalgo (2014), this framework is constituted by at least six indissoluble contradictions, which are summarized in the chart below:

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[4] See Kailitz 2017, 128.

[5] The above quoted speech by Victor Orbán at Băile Tuşnad in July 2014 is an almost perfect example for this.

[6] For this particular paradox of democracy, see the relevant considerations by Jacques Derrida (2006, 54-61), who speaks about the "autoimmunity" of democracy.

Subtypes of Democracy		Opposing Democratic Principles
liberal	republican	liberty vs. equality (1)
representative	direct	representation vs. popular sovereignty (2)
elitist	participatory	quality vs. quantity (concerning democratic procedures of decision-making) (3)
majoritarian	consensus	plurality vs. social unity (4)
modern	ancient	individual vs. collective rights and claims (5)
Western	non-Western	universality vs. particularity (6)

TABLE 1: Six Democratic Antinomies (Source: Hidalgo 2014)

These six opposing principles (or antinomies) listed on the right column of the table each include a definitely legitimate aspect of democracy and, therefore, illustrate why the idea of democracy can be expanded in corresponding couples of normatively equal subtypes.[7] At least from the perspective of intellectual history, liberty *and* equality, representation *and* popular sovereignty, quality *and* quantity, plurality *and* social unity, individual *and* collective claims and, finally, universality *and* particularity are democratic principles of equal normative rank (Cunningham 2003; Dunn 2005; Nolte 2012). Hence, the conceptual history of democracy can be systematically reconstructed along with its constitutive indissoluble contradictions (Hidalgo 2014). Moreover, regarding the analysis of the wide range of existing semantic constructions launched by political scholars in order to specify the rather amorphous root concept of democracy (Collier and Levitsky 1997), the identified twelve adjectives on the left columns of table 1 do not reduce the democratic character of a political system[8] or emphasize dominant institutions within democracy.[9] Instead, the identified six coupled subtypes of democracy may suggest that beyond the wide range of models and subtypes of democracy, there are several normatively equivalent versions, which strengthens the impression that within legitimate democracies, opposing normative principles can coexist.

This is why democracy can (and preferentially) be understood as a discursive framework in which different or even contrary political decisions are available. Such a reality requires that in every working democracy, political goals and demands stressing, for instance, liberty against equality, social unity against plurality, collective claims against individual rights (or, respectively, vice versa) must always keep respect for the political opponents and may not abolish political oppositions by pursuing extreme objectives or denying the general entitlement of opposing views. Accordingly, democracy implies a permanent struggle to bring into, or to keep its extremes in, a dynamic balance. In the political practice of democratic systems, this theoretical insight usually leads to tangible trade-offs between the contradicting democratic principles (Hidalgo 2019). Precisely, such trade-offs may result in (1) the coexistence between free markets and social state; (2) between parliamentarism and popular referenda, elections and public debates; (3) between majority rule and the rule of law; (4) between a clash of pluralistic opinions and lifestyles on the one hand and an understanding of collective identity

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[7] For this, see the two columns on the left side of the table.

[8] For instance, adjectives with such an evidently reductive impact could be registered a "defective," "authoritarian," "embedded," "guided," "semi," or a "neopatrimonial" form of democracy. Cf. Merkel 2004.

[9] An example for this would be the traditional opposition of parliamentary and presidential democracy. In many cases, the emphasis on one dominant institution in democracy is significantly connected with a reductive character in the sense of the adjectives in footnote eight. To prove this, we could, for example, refer to the semantics of "military-dominated," "electoral," "nonpartisan," or "one-party" democracies.

of people on the other; (5) between the simultaneous validity of civil rights as well as the duties of solidarity; (6) and, finally, between the defense of national interests and the responsibility toward solving global problems and protecting human rights.

Against this elaborated background, the problem of illiberal democracy becomes rather evident. With the help of the democratic antinomies approach, we are able to sum up a synchronic "illiberal" and "liberal" character of democracy. The illiberal character is demonstrated by the next chart. Here, the far-left column (which is in italic letters) illustrates the genuine liberal character of the idea of democracy as well as the most important liberal principles and values: liberty, representation, quality/rule of law/constitutionalism, plurality, individual rights, and universality. At the same time, the opposing counter-principles listed in the left-middle column elucidate that the political goals, which are usually complained by illiberal or populist actors—equality, popular sovereignty, majority rule, social homogeneity, the superiority of the community, and, finally, the particularity and singularity of each democratic political body—signify authentic principles of democracy as well. Hence, the already introduced opposing principles the democratic system consists of can be revisited as the liberal-illiberal paradox of democracy.

Democratic Antinomies		One-Sided Illiberal/Populist Democracy
liberty	equality	illiberal equality (defamation of established political classes, elites, and active politicians) (1)
representation	popular sovereignty	illiberal sovereignty (general critique on representative institutions, parties and corporations) (2)
quality	quantity	illiberal quantity (tyranny of majority) (3)
plurality	social unity	illiberal homogeneity (antipluralism/exclusivism) (4)
individual rights	collective claims	illiberal community (antimodernism) (5)
universality	particularity	illiberal particularism (radical nationalism and chauvinism/violation of human rights) (6)

TABLE 2: Biased Populist/Illiberal Democracy with Troubled/Abolished Balances (Source: Hidalgo 2019)

Yet an actual illiberal (or also a biased liberal form of)[10] democracy tends to undermine the logic of democratic antinomies as such. In this regard, the broad right column of table 2 not only reveals the biased form of a democratic order every illiberal democracy includes but also points out the self-destroying character that inevitably results from overemphasizing the (basically legitimate) illiberal sides of democracy. Thus, whenever illiberal or populist political actors defame the established political classes, elites and active political professionals with the help of pseudo-egalitarian arguments (which are often accompanied by a strong vindication of political and social security) (1), demand a rather limitless popular sovereignty which is placed against representative institutions, established political parties, and corporations (2), push an intransigent rule of the majority (or even a tyranny of the majority) to prevent a possible self-containment of democracy by the rule of law (3), enforce a homogeneous collective identity based on nationalist, culture-specific, or religious ideas against more pluralistic or multicultural notions (4), insist on a strict superiority of the community over all

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[10] Meanwhile, such a one-sided 'liberal' democracy denying the 'illiberal' counter-principles of democracy is commonly called a "postdemocracy." For this, see Wolin 2001, 561ff., Crouch 2004, Mair 2013 or Mouffe 2018.

individual rights (5) and, finally, overrule all universal values and foster, in reverse, the idea of a democratic particularism and segregation due to national or even chauvinistic claims (6),[11] their efforts represent nothing less than a buy-out of democracy with the help of democratic principles. In contrast to this, a working democracy has just to maintain its liberal-illiberal paradox and, therefore, keep its inherent illiberal or populist elements in a balance with its liberal institutions and nonpopulist principles.

As a result, democracy demonstrates both a substantial alignment to illiberal or populist politics and strategies (whenever only one side of its conflicting principles is accentuated in an absolutizing manner) *and* a fundamental resistance to such a one-sided appearance of illiberal or populist democracy by cultivating its liberal and nonpopulist counter-principles at the same time. Within this gap, illiberal and populist political actors can pursue their political agenda in the name of democracy against democracy. And although we have to stress that illiberal democracy and populism are not simply synonyms—since liberal politics could also be enforced by populist rhetoric and strategies, whereas populism has no strict political content orientation and must at least partly be seen as a specific style of politics and political communication (e.g., Taggart 2000; Moffitt and Tormey 2014)—the relationship between the liberal and the illiberal is similar to the relationship between democracy and populism. As populism habitually happens within the framework of democratic procedures and processes (and may erode them finally without being just an antidemocratic phenomenon), illiberal politics incline to exploit and to even destroy the existing structures of a liberal polity without being only a strictly antiliberal occurrence.

3. Religion as a Resource for Illiberal Politics and Illiberal Democracy

After clarifying the concept of illiberal democracy together with the liberal-illiberal paradox of democracy itself, we have to return to the question what kind of role religion plays in these relationships. In order to identify illiberal tendencies of religion(s) in this context, this paper will first highlight the classical intertwinement between traditional religious thinking and the concepts of authority, hierarchy, and inequality, along with its specific (and paradoxical) appeal to the idea of democratic equality (III 1). Second, it will discuss to what extent belonging to a certain religious group offers a widely used option not only to define social and political identities based upon the idea of exclusion but also to underpin politics in terms of illiberal rhetoric and programs, such as antipluralism, nationalism, sexism, and even racism (III 2).

Accordingly, the following remarks do not apply a concept of religion in order to refer to specific religious communities, doctrines, institutions, or contents of faith. Instead, the concept of religion is rather used as an "empty signifier" in the sense of Ernesto Laclau (2006)—that is a hegemonic representative of a collection of various normative demands combined by this signifier. Such a concept can emphasize religion's ability to function as a social resource to designate a value-based collective identity with significant political effects and consequences.

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[11] For these six typical characteristics of illiberal or populist positions and purposes, compare, for example, the studies by Mény and Surel (2000); Mudde (2004 and 2007); Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012); Priester (2007 and 2012); Pirro (2015); de la Torre (2015); and Müller (2017).

Religion as a vital source of illiberal programs due to the theological-political ideas of authority, hierarchy, and (in)equality

Regarding the first matter in this section, we can rely on many classical thinkers from the history of political thought who have showed the deep affinity religion has with authority, hierarchy, and (in)equality.

Concerning the idea of authority, we should keep in mind that even those well-known authors who have argued that religion has a positive impact on democracy — for instance Jean-Jacques Rousseau (in the last chapter of the *Contrat social*, 1762) and Alexis Tocqueville (in his brilliant study about the *Democracy in America* 1835/1840), or later Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde (2013, 92-114),[12] Robert D. Putnam (2000), and Jürgen Habermas (2005) — should be subsumed under the general perspective that religion and democracy follow contradictory principles. Here, the main question is whether the evident opposition between the democratic idea of authority (based upon the rule of law and of the majority)[13] and religion (with its claim for an absolute truth) either enforces democracy to renounce any religious authority or, by implication, gives democracy the opportunity to compensate its identified vices—for example, social atomism, disintegration, a lack of social capital and civic engagement, clientele policy, and disoriented masses—with the aid of religious authority. In this respect, a one-sided perspective has to be avoided. Instead, by comprehending the possible compensatory effects of religion as an authoritarian counterweight to liberal democracy, we can deepen our understanding of its negative potentials as well. We can learn from history that as soon as religions or religious actors do not fully accept the main democratic principle of religious freedom and attempt to become more than one political voice among (many) others, the political role of religion starts to exert an antipluralistic influence on democracy and, therefore, develops its inherent illiberal tendencies. Thus, the challenge of all religious democracies, whether Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, or Confucian, is to avoid a hegemonic role for religion and to find a sustainable basis for an arrangement between religious and secular groups (Bhargava 2010, 82).[14]

In accordance with this, all classical and contemporary approaches ascribing religion a positive social and political impact for democracy face a problem of legitimacy. Since the beneficial effects being expected from religious authority depend on the power people get from their trust in the revelation, this kind of power deals with strengths and motivations whose reasons of legitimacy and authority are questioned by nonbelievers or adherents of alternative religious groups at the same time. Thus, the political role of religion in democracies with a pluralistic populace has always to maintain a rather supplementary character, especially by respecting the issue that religious authority never means an avenue for political power.

However, at this point, we have to refer once again to the aspect that the liberal and illiberal discourses closely coincide. Regarding religion, this coinciding reveals the political impact of religious faith, on the one hand, as a matter extraneous to liberal democracy, which is nevertheless expected to compensate for the weaknesses and vices of democratic principles and procedures on the other. As a consequence, the distinction between a successful liberal accommodation of religion and its problematic illiberal instrumentalization gets blurred. This offers illiberal political actors the opportunity to make use of the promised benefits of religious authority without necessarily arousing the suspicion of contravening the liberal boundaries of democracy. The illiberal preoccupation of religion is an almost perfect example for our essential thesis that the illiberal discourse is commonly capable of incorporating the intellectual

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[12] Böckenförde's relevant article about the liberal secular state existing on premises that it cannot guarantee itself was first published in 1967.

[13] For this, see once again the third antinomy of democracy in section II.

[14] Additionally, we can also refer to the twin toleration argument by Alfred Stepan (2001) in this context.

premises of political liberalism and, therefore, subverting the logic of liberal and democratic values and institutions from the inside out.

A second illiberal tendency of religion deeply connected with the question of authority can be reconstructed along with the traditional idea of hierarchy. To grasp this aspect, we have to understand the ambivalent character the opposing idea of equality shows in the realm of religion (Christianity, Judaism, or Islam). There is ample evidence that the idea of equality belongs to the most important moral and social principles justified by the Old and the New Testament. The Bible of the Christian God is very unambiguous in telling its readers that all men are created equal and every single person must be seen as a child of God. Thus, it commands to love and serve everyone no matter what their age, ethnicity, social status, color, or gender. This sort of equality is a clear consequence of several Christian (as well as Jewish and Islamic) dogmas, for example monotheism, the impartiality of God, the godlikeness and dignity of human beings, as well as the commandments of humility, charity and love. And as God, according to the Christian bible, is the creator and the maker of all men and women, the differences between rich and poor, male and female, slaves and free persons, or citizens and foreign nationals do not have any meaning in his view.

Yet this religious idea of equality remains first of all a genuine theological and metaphysical concept and does not clearly lead itself to social or political realties. Therefore, the theological equality and dignity of all human beings has never been interpreted by every believer as against existing social hierarchies and inequalities, especially as there are a couple of texts within the Bible suggesting the opposite. For instance (and as it is well known), many passages demand the subjection of women by stressing that the head of every man is Christ, but the head of the woman is man (1 Corinthians 11:3-16), that wives should submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22-24; Colossians 3:18; Peter 3:1-6), that women should remain silent in church (1 Corinthians 14:33-35), and that women must remain quiet and have no authority over men (1 Timothy 2:11-15). Moreover, it is at least uncertain and controversial to argue whether the Christian dogma of equality could be read as a social revolutionary doctrine or rather includes a tentative attempt, if any, to improve the situation of human beings on earth, fight poverty et cetera. This obvious 'blind spot' is by no means exclusively based upon the separation between heaven and earth, temporal and spiritual authorities. Instead, we have to draw our attention to the special context in which Christian thinkers like Thomas Aquinas and others developed their advocacy for a natural social hierarchy. This context is definitely the political community for which the subordination of females, slaves, and other human beings is understood to be crucial, as the common welfare could only be achieved through the rule of inferior classes by superior ones.[15]

Accordingly, religions (Christianity but also Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam) traditionally stand for the (Platonic and Aristotelian) assumption that the inequality between individuals and the resulting social stratification lead to an idea of community, division of responsibilities and social harmony emanating from a higher order (Strenski 2014). In return, the whole community as the reference point of hierarchy ensures that the contrary of hierarchy— equality—is not just eliminated but still forms an integral part in this whole. However, this

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[15] In this respect, we may refer to an argument by the French anthropologist Louis Dumont (1980) in order to understand the role of religion being able to encompass the opposition between hierarchy and equality. Since, in the view of Dumont, the hierarchical encompassment brings differences and opposing values into a relationship with respect to a larger whole but only in a differential, an unequal, and an asymmetrical way, his concept of hierarchy does not only function as the intrinsic structure of a value-based order but also as a symbol that indicates the superiority of community against all individual interests. "Hierarchy is synonymous to holism" (Dumont 1979, 806) and encompasses "a contradiction (or a complementary) […] within a unity of a higher order" (Dumont 1971, 78).

part is indeed subordinated and gets its meaning and significance only in relation to (and from the perspective of) the underlying higher and value-based order.

In this regard, the concept of hierarchy may particularly explain why a religious community as the prototype of a higher and sacred order is able to encompass equality in a way that keeps this value in check by the benevolence of a supreme being while allowing the normative (political and social) dominance of its opposite—inequality. The opposite to this hierarchically structured religious community is obviously the modern (and Western) society of equals, which is characterized by the decline of the community and the predominant role of individual interests. Therefore, the modern ideology of equality and individualism enforces (as normative hierarchies) the supremacy of the economy over politics, of material goods over human relations, and of individual or egoistic aims over the demands of the community (Dumont 1985 and 1992). So once again, religion (as a paradigm of a hierarchical order) is here suggested as an (illiberal) authoritarian counterweight to the modern (and liberal) ideology of equality, economy, and individualism—a counterweight that is eventually needed to produce cohesiveness, solidarity, and social homogeneity and, vice versa, to prevent disintegration, egoism, and social atomization.

The Common Role of Religion and Illiberal Politics in Democratic Societies

Religion's affinity to authority and hierarchy together with its, nonetheless, special ability to encompass an idea of equality provides an idiosyncratic contribution to illiberal politics within a (still and apparently working) democratic framework. In this respect, we must be aware of the fact that contemporary illiberal ideologies, programs, and actors, at least on the right-wing of the political spectrum, usually face one main challenge: To articulate their relevant political objectives without violating the principles that secure the legitimacy of democracy. Particularly the extremely one-sided subtype of illiberal democracy habitually proclaimed by illiberal and populist actors (see the right column of table 2 in section II) needs support to compensate its evident legitimacy deficits. In this regard, religion or religious arguments and strategies could function as an adequate gap filler.

The latter becomes evident if we observe a main programmatic inconsistency that all right-wing populists must face: As members of the right camp, they usually espouse political goals and contents stressing the things that make people unequal and not equal (Bobbio 1997). This bias includes, for instance, premises and assumptions, such as the irreversibility of social and economic stratification, the incompatibility of cultural and ethnic differences, a hierarchical gender order, and the priority (or even superiority) of one's own nation (Minkenberg 2018). However, populist strategies rather have to postulate the opposite[16]—that is, an antielitist attitude as well as a radical affirmation of democratic equality, together with the principle of "one person, one vote," which is set against all constitutional limitations regarding people's sovereignty. Accordingly, religion and religious arguments may fit as a remedy to this programmatic shortcoming. As a not scarce, plentiful and, therefore, not an economic good (Walzer 1983, Ch. 10), religion offers its promised advantages—meaning, divine grace, solace, moral orientation, and redemption—as completely unrelated to one's social status and beyond all existing social differences. Not only does this capacity make religion suitable enough to commit rich and poor people to collective goals, but it also provides right wing illiberal leaders, such as Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Victor Orbán, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and others, who belong to the economic elite in their countries, a healthy portion of credibility that they really work for the common good and not just for themselves. Moreover, a selective appeal to theological sources, together with a patriarchal, antiemancipatory interpretation of the religious heritage, offers right wing populists welcome assistance for justifying the subordination of women in the name of an equal subjection of men and women under the

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[16] See footnote 11.

natural and sacralized order.[17] In this respect, the religious encompassment of hierarchy and equality strengthens both the priority of community and the importance of social homogeneity, which leads to a coherent and consistent ideology after all.

Furthermore, a similar encompassment of hierarchy and equality can also be observed in the amalgamation of religiousness and racism as typical components of radical right-wing doctrines. As Carl Schmitt pointed out in *State, Movement, People* (1933), the equality of race as the main reason for the collective identity and unity of a political body ensures both a clear demarcation to an unequal (and subordinated) outside and, nevertheless, a certain reminiscence to the democratic principle of equality (Schmitt 2001). In addition, Schmitt's *Verfassungslehre* (1928) suggests that this racist encompassment of equality and hierarchy leads to the assumption that political rulers in modern representative democracies are not distinguished *from* but only *by* the people (Schmitt 1993, 237). At the same time, the traditional oppositions between egalitarian democracy and authoritarian dictatorship are leveled.

Additionally, Schmitt's political theology gives us an impression into what perspective of international relations ordinarily allows right-wing populists to merge religion, racism, hierarchy, and equality—that is, an ideology of ethnopluralism (Holmes 2000; Spektorowski 2003; Rydgren 2007). In this respect, the Schmittian idea of an international system shaped by the polarity of political entities, which are due to segregating religious, cultural and racist identities,[18] anticipated the ethnopluralistic model of the far right of today. Stressing the (alleged) indissoluble separation of varying ethnic, cultural, and religious groups and, therefore, the need for cultural homogenization, the ethnopluralistic position strictly opposes the existence of heterogeneity and multiculturalism within states and nations as well as a unipolar world order due to the universality of human rights (de Benoist 2013).[19]

In sum, religion definitely plays s an important part in any illiberal attempt to instrumentalize democracy. In this respect, the illiberal and right-wing populists' endeavor to arbitrate between an authoritarian and democratic state and to legitimize the priority of the political community against all individual rights obviously benefits from an understanding of religion as a paradigm of authority, hierarchy, and (in)equality. Moreover, an alliance with the church and religion as traditional moral authorities is among the usual aims of right-wing populists in order to get some support from the bourgeois middle-class as well.

Such a gain of normative authority by religious arguments and, at best, by church dignitaries is eventually crucial for all illiberal and right-wing political agendas. On the one hand, it can help to refute the plausible accusation that right-wing populists just try to enforce a tyranny of the majority while destroying individual rights and the rule of law. On the other hand, a religious anchoring of right-wing propaganda could obviously strengthen its legitimizing impact. Proceeding from this, illiberal and antipluralistic positions could be revisited as euphemistic synonyms for the need of a common identity, solidarity, communal spirit, and even as resistance against the negative outgrowths of liberalism and liberal democracy, such as egoism, individualism, and social atomization. For right-wing populists, it is, therefore,

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[17] For an empirical proof that right wing populists all over Europe preferably mobilize against gender equality with such religious arguments, see, for example, Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) and Hennig (2018).

[18] For this, see most of all Schmitt's work *The Concept of the Political* (1932).

[19] In the idea of ethnopluralism, we are able to recognize once again a meshing of hierarchy and equality, since ethnic, racial, cultural, and religious separatism definitely proceeds from the requirement of hierarchically organized communities and encompasses equality by the means of the comparability of homogenous political bodies. However, the contrast between "the traditional conception of racism" and "the doctrine of ethnopluralism" by calling the latter as "not hierarchical" (Rydgren 2007, 244) cannot be overestimated. Indeed, it belongs to the self-assessment of the New Right (cf. de Benoist and Champetier 2012) that "different ethnicities are not necessarily superior or inferior [but] only different, incompatible and incommensurable" (Rydgren 2007, 244). However, the culturalist turn of the former biological racism in New Right positions should not be overlooked (Balibar 2007).

of great advantage that religious accommodation in modern democracies apparently works, although religion yet remains a fundamental antithesis to genuine democratic principles. In this way, even critiques towards right-wing populists who act as demagogues and embrace national chauvinism are at least relativized.

4. Religious Backgrounds of Illiberal Democracy: Evidence from Three Central and Eastern European Countries

The following remarks on the empirical role of religion in a number of (illiberal) democracies in Central and Eastern Europe are not designed as systematic case studies but only offer a bare listing of examples illustrating the theoretically subsumed nexus between religious identities and arguments and illiberal politics in sections II and III. Substantively, the relevant considerations focus on three states of the Visegrád Group,[20] namely Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.[21] Today, all of these three states share the political goal of not becoming immigration countries; they interpret fixed EU distribution quotas for refugees as illegitimate interferences in domestic affairs and try to increase the political weight of the EU member states against the European Commission, the Council, and the Parliament.

In contrast to Poland and Hungary, Slovakia is in the Eurozone (since 2009), and it has at least agreed to take in small contingents of refugees; the country is generally seen as comparatively Europe friendly. Accordingly, at the end of 2017, the EU Commission instigated legal proceedings only against Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic over their categorical refusal to take in a certain quota of refugees based on an agreed EU distribution program. However, together with the other members of the Visegrád Group, Slovakia rejected the UN Migration Pact in 2018; it was not willing to support "illegal" immigration for economic reasons. Furthermore, the inflexible position of the Visegrád Group has prevented the EU from making substantial progress in reforming its refugee laws.

Hence, Slovakia's social democratic government under the leadership of Robert Fico (2012-2018) and Peter Pellegrini (since 2018) has avoided prosecution by the EU Commission, whereas the EU has launched additional infringement procedures against Poland and Hungary because of the constitutional developments in both countries since 2015, including judicial and media reforms that were interpreted by the Commission as violations of the principles of the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary and, therefore, the separation of powers. Consequently, the political developments under the nationalist governments in Poland (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [PiS]) and Hungary (Fidesz) can be presumed as prototypes for that kind of illiberal democracy we have described in section II, whereas in Slovakia, we are able to assert only weaker characteristics of such illiberal tendencies. As we have already seen, this sort of illiberalism is basically marked by a strict emphasis on people's sovereignty, the will of the majority, social homogeneity, the right of the (hierarchically structured) political community, and the priority of national interests at the expense of institutional boundaries, the rule of law, plurality, civil rights, and universal values. Moreover, it belongs to the self-image of illiberal democracies that they are mainly not perceived as an attack on democracy itself. In this respect, Poland and Hungary can insist on the fact that people's affirmation of democracy as preferable to any other form of government is indeed not outstanding (48 % and 47 %, respectively) but

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[20] Visegrád is another historically significant city in Hungary, where European kings once met for political and economic negotiations. It symbolizes the national self-confidence of Central and East European countries.

[21] However, with regard to the subject of religion, this article does not discuss the fourth member of the Visegrád Group, the Czech Republic, which is the most secular country in Europe "with nearly three quarters of adults (72 %) describing their religion as atheist, agnostic or 'nothing in particular'" and with less than 29 % religiously affiliated people (PEW Research Center 2017, 9, 20)

is at least located above the average of the rest of Eastern European countries (PEW Research Center 2017, 40, 141).[22]

With regard to the role of religion concerning the illiberal turn, we start with the finding that national and religious identities ostentatiously converge in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe—a region that was once dominated by atheist regimes (PEW Research Center 2017). In this respect, Western and Eastern European countries significantly diverge concerning religious identities, the principal political meaning of religion, and the treatment of religious and cultural minorities (PEW Research Center 2018). Regarding the Visegrád Group, this divergence cannot be explained by possible differences between Orthodox Christianity dominating in Eastern Europe and Catholicism or Protestantism in Western Europe. In contrast to Orthodox majority countries, such as Russia, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Armenia, Moldova, Belarus, and Georgia,[23] Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia now as before have a Catholic majority.[24]

In Poland, huge parts of this Catholic majority have been mobilized by nationalist and illiberal populists within the last years. Ben Stanley (2016) pointed out the extent to which the moral dichotomy Polish right-wing populists launched between the illegitimate, corrupt, and Europe-friendly elite, on the one hand, and the authentic, legitimate, and honest people, on the other, benefited from its correspondence that clearly distinguished between good and evil and was supported by relevant religious actors. Moreover, Polish populists were also able to use organizational structures, emotional ties, and the rituals of the nation-centric brand of Catholicism in postcommunist Poland in order to strengthen the idea of a political and socially homogenous community in Poland, which is based upon both a grassroots organization and the truth of the religious heritage, including a hierarchically structured natural gender order. Rather precisely, Stanley (2016, section 2) highlighted the political influence of the League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin, LPR)—a party that represents a closed variant of Catholicism and attacks both religious nonbelief and the open liberal form of Catholicism invoked in Western societies. Stanley then turned to the case of the Party for Law and Justice (PiS), which successfully exploits the strategic advantages of the religious and illiberal mainstream in Poland (Stanley 2016, section 3).

In Hungary, as we have already reiterated in the introduction to this article, Prime Minister Victor Orbán explicitly presents himself as the political leader of both an illiberal and Christian democracy. In this respect, a comprehensive study by Zoltán Ádám and András Bozóki (2016) revealed how the right-wing populism represented by Fidesz has worked together for some time with the Catholic Church (Magyar Katolikus Egyház) and other Christian denominations. Orbán's illiberal emphasis on community, social homogeneity, authority, (gender) hierarchy, exclusivism, and national particularism claims not only to personify the general will of the sovereign Hungarian people but also to incarnate the religious truth of Christianity and, therefore, the political-religious identity of the Hungarian nation as such. As an explanation for the assumed nexus between religion and illiberal politics in Hungary, Ádám and Bozóki (2016, 146) distinguished between the enforced 'National Christianity' and the repressed

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[22] In both countries, 26 % say that in some circumstances a nondemocratic government can be preferable (PEW Research Center 2017, 40).

[23] Here, the character of the religious-political identity in Orthodox-majority countries is predominantly suggested by the fact that in Orthodox countries, religion is considered as being more important to national identity than in Catholic countries (Pew Research Center 2017, 153). Furthermore, this is seen by the widespread support for Russia protecting Orthodox Christians outside its borders (PEW Research Center 2017, 31). In this respect, even an obligation toward Russia is felt by majorities in Armenia (79 %), Serbia (74 %), Russia (72 %), Romania (65 %), Moldova (63 %), Belarus (62 %), Georgia (52 %) and Bulgaria (56 %), whereas in the Ukraine only a minority of 38 % shares this opinion. In many Orthodox-majority countries, Russia is still seen as buffer against the West, too (PEW Research Center 2017, 35).

[24] In Poland, 87 % identify themselves as being Catholic, whereas only 7 % are religiously unaffiliated (for Hungary, it is 57 % and 21 %, respectively) (PEW Research Center 2017, 20). In Slovakia, the share of Catholics is about 64 % (Demy and Shaw 2019, 664).

'Christianity as a religion of love' in this state. The authors also identified the religious priority Orbán and Fidesz give to the interest of the Hungarian nation against all political obligations that may result from a universal notion of human rights.[25]

Thus, similar to Poland, Christianity in Hungary evoked some direct support for the illiberal political agenda of the Hungarian government, since the political influence of religious leaders is comparatively high in both countries (Poland 75 %, Hungary 56 %, see PEW Research Center 2017, 99)[26] and religious people there express much greater pride in their nationality than nonreligious ones (Poland 45 % vs. 21 %, Hungary 55 % vs. 28 %, Pew Research Center 2017, 149). Moreover, 55 % of people in Poland and 46 % in Hungary confess that they are convinced of the cultural superiority of their own nation (Pew Research Center 2017, 150). To this, it must be added that Catholics in Poland and Hungary are even less willing to accept Muslims as their neighbors or as citizens of their country than Christians in most of the countries with an Orthodox majority (PEW Research Center 2017, 161). However, the even more crucial point is that "National Christianity" in Hungary and Poland apparently prevented the evolution of a religiously motivated counterweight to the both governments' nationalist and particularistic attitudes, for instance by honoring human dignity as one of the most important principles in Christianity or by respecting the calls by Pope Francis to open their doors for refugees. In other words, the illiberal impact of religion in contemporary Hungary and Poland is most of all due the fact that the possibly liberal and universal interpretations of Christian sources are neglected.

Compared to this, the case of Slovakia is an ambiguous one (Demy and Shaw 2019, 664ff.). On the one hand, Andrej Danko, the leader of the nationalist party and head of parliament in Slovakia who permanently argues against the 'civilizational threats' posed by (Muslim) immigrants and homosexuals, successfully promoted a law which denied Islam and Muslims the status as a religious community because of being a too small minority in Slovakia. On the other hand, the social democratic majority in the parliament supported the obviously illiberal course of the nationalists only halfway and for outwardly opportunistic reasons. From this, we can presume that in Slovakia as well the widespread "National Christian" (or Catholic) identity of people facilitates an illiberal enforcement of social and cultural homogeneity and, therefore, leads political parties with different agendas to make significant concessions. To conclude, Slovakia can be seen as the third convincing example from Central and Eastern Europe that the success (or failure) of political illiberalism in a country may depend to a certain degree on religion.

5. Conclusion

Summing up, the three Visegrád states Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia confirm our thesis that the assumed connection between illiberal and (nationalist) religious positions is empirically significant. In this respect, the idea of nationalism in Western Europe apparently diverges from the intertwinement of religious belief and national belonging in contemporary Central and Eastern Europe, since the (originally Western) concept of "nation" as well as the ideology of "nationalism" originally replaced traditional religious identities and limited the (modern) idea of political community to the territorial borders of the national state (Anderson 1991). However, such a divergence, which tends to become an essentialist argument,[27] is not

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[25] For the (political) state of religion in Hungary, see as well Demy and Shaw 2019, 584ff.

[26] On the other hand, only a third of the Hungarians (33 %) and the Polish (31 %) really want religious leaders to have a "large political influence" (PEW Research Center 2017, 100).

[27] See already the critiques by Kuzio (2002) and Hroch (2004) on Hans Kohn's (1945) or Eric Hobsbawn's (1990) dichotomy between Western, liberal, and territorially based nationalism as a free association of individuals and the Eastern, illiberal, ethnic, and organic variant of nationalism.

really relevant in our context, since contemporary illiberal and right-wing actors in Western countries—for instance the *Rassemblement National* in France, the *Lega* in Italy, the *FPÖ* in Austria, and the *AfD* in Germany—obviously have a lot in common with the idea of "Nationalist Christianity" in Central and Eastern Europe.[28]

As a result, there is definitely some evidence that illiberal enforcements of antipluralism, anticonstitutionalism, anti-individualism, and antiuniversalism generally profit from exclusivist religious attitudes dominating in a particular society. Concerning the cases of Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, selective references to religion enable illiberal actors not only to claim for themselves a higher level of authority and legitimacy but also to make it plausible to a wider public that their real intention is not to damage people's sovereignty but to act in favor of democracy by fighting against its liberal diseases. In this regard, the classical idea that religion could function as an authoritarian counterweight to liberal democracy curing the negative sides of liberalism is very attractive from an illiberal point of view. Thus, as populists attempt to use (or misuse) the concept of democracy for their own purposes, illiberal actors may find in religion the best resource to give their political projects a semblance of legitimacy. Moreover, with the aid of religion being the traditional paradigm of authority, hierarchy, and (in)equality, a coherent political right-wing agenda becomes available. And although there is neither an inevitable link between religion and illiberal politics nor a special affinity of religion to liberal democracy, this article goes beyond a simple confirmation of the well-known ambivalence of religion in the realms of politics. Against the presented theoretical background, it becomes not just evident that political actors can do with religion whatever they want to do; instead, we were able to clarify why religion may be particularly susceptible or even vulnerable to becoming a resource for illiberal politics.

Nevertheless, we should not overestimate the importance of religion for illiberal political actors as such. As a matter of course, the principles of the illiberal and hierarchical society promoted by Victor Orbán and others cannot be interpreted just (or exclusively) on religious grounds. Religion is only a supporting and by no means a necessary factor for political illiberalism. For instance, this is proved by the fact that in the fourth Visegrád state, the Czech Republic—where the illiberal tendencies are represented mostly by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and the populist party ANO (*Akce nespokojených občanů*), Tomio Okamura and the Eurosceptic, anti-immigration, and prodirect democracy party SPD *(Svoboda a přímá demokracie)*, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) or also the first directly elected President Miloš Zeman—the role of religious factors is only marginal, although they are not absent. Apart from that, it is still an open question as to why the hierarchical order of Catholicism cannot impose the papal migration policy on Central European Catholics in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia just as little as on Catholics in many other European countries with a relevant major population. In this regard, however, we have to take into consideration once again that religion as an empty signifier is never synonymous with the official positions of churches, religious communities, and their representatives but a rather amorphous resource to gain a collective identity. This does not only explain why illiberal actors can eventually make use of religion against the political positions of church representatives but even why a religious identity is actually required by a lot of secular people. Thus, the religious backgrounds of illiberal democracy in Eastern as well as in Western Europe are only comprehensible if we recognize religion as a political factor beyond belief in a theological sense.

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[28] For this, see e.g. Wood 2016 and the Special Issue 2018 (Vol. 2) of the *Journal for Religion, Society and Politics* (ZRGP). In addition, the nexus of illiberal politics and religion in Egypt, India, and the USA is considered by Hibbard (2015).

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