

TAKING PART IN TRANSNATIONAL MARTYRDOM: Construction of Interdenominational and Interreligious Relations in Lithuanian Christian Persecution Discourse¹

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ABSTRACT: The paper presents an analysis of the discursive construction of Christianity and interdenominational and interreligious relations in the Christian persecution discourse of Lithuanian Catholic anti-genderist groups. The analysis is based on a case study of the discourse developed by Tomas Viluckas in his news portal, Laikmetis (laikmetis.lt), which was operationalised by the Christian Professional Union. The analysis shows that not only does religion have an influence on gender politics, but current debates on gender politics in broader society also shape religion and interreligious relations. Public debates on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Lithuania fuelled the perceived relevance of the idea of Christian persecution. This discourse highlighted the multid denominational nature of Christianity and challenged the dominant vision of the national Catholic Church as the sole defender of what is imagined as the traditional Lithuanian family, even if the hierarchy of religious communities in Lithuania features the Roman Catholic Church at the top.

KEYWORDS: interdenominational and interreligious relations, Christian persecution discourse, gender politics.

INTRODUCTION

In 2021-2022, there were heated public debates in Lithuania over the ratification of the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention). This was not the first attempt to ratify the Convention, which the country signed in 2013. However, 2021-2022 coincided with attempts to pass the law on civil partnerships aiming to provide regulation for LGBTQ+ couples, as well as with Covid-related restrictions (and discontent) and the rise of populism. The combination of these circumstances led to unprecedented vehement public debates, mass events, radicalisation of opponents, intensification of hate speech against LGBTQ+ people and gender equality proponents and attempts to introduce harsher penalties for hate crimes. As before, the Lithuanian Catholic

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Church and other religious actors were heavily involved in efforts to prevent the ratification and other gender equality initiatives. Religion is important in the Lithuanian anti-genderist discourse, like in other Eastern European countries, in this case, mainly because of the coalescence of nationalism and Catholicism. The national Catholic Church as the defender of the nation and the Lithuanian family is a prevalent image that justifies the involvement of religious actors in Lithuanian anti-genderist formations. At the same time, other Lithuanian Christian denominations and religious groups also participate in individual and joint anti-genderist endeavours. To make sense of, and in an attempt to influence, current gender politics, Lithuanian Catholics may employ other discourses, such as the Christian persecution discourse.

Religion influences gender politics in broader society, as the current limited success of the implementation of gender equality in Lithuania and numerous studies on historical and contemporary developments throughout the world demonstrate. At the same time, the gender politics of broader society has an impact on religion. Among other spheres, gender politics contributes to shaping interdenominational and interreligious relations (here understood as relations among Christian organisations and between Christian and non-Christian religious organisations, respectively). Indeed, views on gender equality have become an identity marker for Christian denominations and frame their relations (Chaves 1997). Religious anti-genderist actors act through national and international interreligious coalitions to pursue their agendas (Bob 2012; Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Zorgdrager 2020 and others).

Developed in reaction to various factors and used for various ends (Herrington 2021), the modern Christian persecution discourse is widely operationalised by religious actors from multiple countries. Often overlapping with fears of Christian persecution in Christian-minority countries, the Christian persecution discourse is based on the imagined or perceived persecution of Christian majorities². As Castelli (2007, 154) puts it, the discourse “mobilizes the language of religious persecution to shut down political debate and critique by characterizing any position not in alignment with this politicized version of Christianity as an example of antireligious bigotry and persecution” and “deploys the archetypal figure of the martyr as a source of unquestioned religious and political authority.” The discourse also overlaps with anti-genderist strategies that use human rights language (Graff et al. 2019; Shevtsova 2023). Historically, the persecution discourse was developed by conservative Evangelicals in the US, but representatives of other Christian denominations have participated in various roles in events and initiatives promoting the discourse (Castelli 2007). Some actors have direct contact with persecuted Christians of the Christian-minority countries they aspire to aid (McAlister 2012), but relations constructed through the discourse and the imagery it mediates can have an even greater impact than such collaborations and face-to-face interactions.

As with any discourse, the Christian persecution discourse constitutes social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge (Fairclough 1992), and it is heavily involved in the construction of interdenominational and interreligious relations. Below the surface of the imagined fundamental opposition between (persecuted) Christians and other religious or non-religious actors involved in persecution situations, the discourse contains abundant references to individuals and communities from specific Christian denominations and religious groups. The producers of this discourse are individuals and organisations who identify as Christians and live in Christian-majority countries. On one level, this discourse constructs relations within their national context; on another, it constructs relations with Christians and other religious groups from the past, such as early Christian martyrs or Christians in Nazi Germany

² Western actors aiming to help persecuted Christians in Christian-minority countries do not necessarily share the embattled consciousness of the Christian persecution discourse. Rather, according to Elisha (2016, 1059), this discourse “exists alongside an internal and largely self-critical discourse fixated on the belief that while foreign brethren are suffering at the “front-lines” of persecution, churchgoers here are more likely to take their freedoms for granted and fall short of life-altering sacrifices befitting an authentic life.”

(Castelli 2007), and/or with those living in distant Christian-minority countries (Castelli 2005; McAlister 2012).

So far, researchers have paid the most attention to the development of this discourse in the US, where it originates (Castelli 2007; McAlister 2012; Herrington 2021, and others). In regards to Europe, researchers have mentioned the discourse as one of the strategies used by actors pursuing anti-genderist and anti-immigration agendas in Poland, Hungary, Ukraine and elsewhere (Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Szent-Iványj and Kugiel 2020; Mayer and Sauer 2017; Shevtsova 2023, and others). Furthermore, scholars now increasingly emphasise that the discourse is among the strategies used by global or international anti-genderist movements and circulates globally. Nevertheless, contemporary gender conservatism within a country not only reflects global conservative movements but is also shaped by national factors (Stoeckl and Uzlaner 2022). While actors in the US and Eastern Europe may use the discourse for similar aims, they operate in significantly different contexts, particularly religious contexts. As a broader social formation that constrains and is changed by the discourse, a national or regional religious landscape may have an influence on and may be reconstituted by the construction of interdenominational and interreligious relations. Initially, the discourse was developed and broadcasted by conservative Evangelical actors in the context of US denominationalism. In the US, various Christian denominations, congregations and groups (defined by their different racial, ethnic or social backgrounds and liberal/conservative inclinations) have different power positions, but none is a majority church with the implications this status has. When the discourse is adopted in countries with majority churches, the vision of Christianity and the constructed relations with other religions may shift to reflect local religious landscapes and already-established relations between actors. Like several other Eastern European countries, Catholicism is Lithuania's majority church. Other Lithuanian Christian denominations have unequal statuses due to their different histories in the country, and some that established their presence recently (especially after 1990) have experienced discrimination and attacks. The analysis of the adoption of the persecution discourse in countries of Eastern and Central Europe with significantly different religious landscapes can reveal much about strategies and means used by religious anti-genderist actors. This analysis can also contribute to our understanding of the impact anti-genderist endeavours have on religion, religious landscapes, and relations among Christian denominations and with other religious groups. How do Lithuanian religious actors use the Christian persecution discourse to pursue their anti-genderist agendas? How does the Lithuanian discourse construct interdenominational and interreligious relations? How do the relations constructed by the discourse reflect, reproduce or challenge the Lithuanian religious landscape and other discourses used by Lithuanian religious anti-genderist actors?

Thus, this paper presents an analysis of the discursive construction of Christianity and interdenominational and interreligious relations in the Christian persecution discourse of Lithuanian Catholic anti-genderist groups. Throughout the paper, persecution is used as an emic term. The analysis is based on a case study of the discourse as developed by Tomas Viluckas in his news portal, Laikmetis (laikmetis.lt), which has been operationalised by the Christian Professional Union. The main materials used for the analysis are texts published on Laikmetis (157 texts published on the website under the category Christian Persecution between 13 February 2021 and April 30, 2022). Additionally, I analysed content on several other websites, including the republishing of publications. First, to understand the Lithuanian interpretation of the persecution discourse, the source materials from news websites and other online outlets based in other countries have been tracked and checked, where possible. Then, to understand the development and distribution of the discourse in Lithuania, I analysed relevant publications in other Lithuanian media outlets and the websites of Christian organisations engaged in anti-genderist critiques (such as krikscioniuprofsajunga.lt, a website

by the Christian Professional Union of Lithuania, or *propatria.lt*, a website by Propatria, a nationalistic Christian organisation).

In what follows, I present a short overview of the engagement of religious organisations with gender politics and related interdenominational and interreligious interactions in Lithuania. Next, I look at earlier instances of the Christian persecution discourse in Lithuanian Christian media. Then, I analyse the interdenominational and interreligious relations that were constructed in the persecution discourse developed in 2021-2022 during debates on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in the country. I argue that not only does religion have an influence on gender politics, but current debates on gender politics in broader society also shape religion and interreligious relations. The public debates on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Lithuania fuelled the perceived relevance of the idea of Christian persecution. This discourse highlighted the multid denominational nature of Christianity and challenged the dominant vision of the national Catholic Church as the sole defender of what is imagined as the traditional Lithuanian family, even if the hierarchy of religious communities in Lithuania features the Roman Catholic Church at the top.

THE LITHUANIAN RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE, DIVERSITY IN LITHUANIAN CATHOLICISM AND ANTI-GENDERIST ENDEAVOURS

Since Lithuanian independence in 1990, various religious groups and institutions have engaged in attempts to influence a range of gender-related issues, essentially to promote conservative gender agendas framed as a defence of the family. Some of the attempts took the form of joint actions, primarily involving a few Christian denominations³ and occasionally other religious groups⁴ (Subačius 2015). The participation of religious groups in the initiatives, at least in part, depends on their status within the Lithuanian religious landscape. The landscape and the politics of religion underlying it are reflected in the hierarchy of religious communities introduced in the Law on Religious Communities and Associations of 1995. The law classifies religious communities and associations into (1) traditional and state-recognised and (2) other⁵. The first category marks a higher status for a religious community or association in the Lithuanian religious landscape. As of 2023, the category includes Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, Evangelical Lutherans, Reformed Evangelicals, Eastern Orthodox, Old Believers, Jews, Suni Muslims, Karaites, as well as the Evangelical Baptist Union, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Pentecostal Evangelical Belief Christian Union, and the New Apostolic Church of Lithuania. Religious communities from the first category mostly participate in joint actions, and the Catholic Church, both in terms of clergy and lay groups, has been behind most of the anti-genderist initiatives.

Lithuania is a Catholic-majority country, with 75-80 per cent of the population identifying with Catholicism consistently throughout the 1990s-2020s, and the terms Christianity and Catholicism are often used interchangeably to denote Catholicism. The Catholic Church is a powerful institution that has an exceptional status among other religious communities established in the Lithuanian law. Nevertheless, Lithuanian Catholicism is not and has never been monolithic. A variety of Catholic views on gender-related issues, the relationship of

³ For example, in 2006, Catholic archbishop Sigitas Tamkevičius and Evangelical Lutheran bishop Mindaugas Sabutis addressed state officials with their joint statement that expressed their opposition to the legitimisation of research done on embryonic stem cells. In 2013, in response to public debates on abortion, Catholic archbishop Tamkevičius, Orthodox archbishop Inokentijus, and Evangelical Lutheran bishop Sabutis signed a joint statement requiring “protection of life” (Subačius 2015).

⁴ Probably the first interreligious initiative was a Joint Statement in Support of Families Based on the Marriage of a Man and a Woman in 1994. Representatives of various, including non-traditional, religious communities (for example, Romuva, a community of contemporary Pagans) joined the initiative (Subačius 2015).

⁵ The Law deals with religious communities and associations that are registered with the Ministry of Justice. Registration is not compulsory and, consequently, there is also a third category of unregistered communities.

the state and the Church, national and transnational Catholic/Christian communities, and, accordingly, proposed ways of anti-genderist action could be seen in recent public debates. Arguments and ways of action depended much on the identity of the Lithuanian Church and the religiosity of Lithuanian Catholics.

Shortly after 1990, the number of people affiliated with the Catholic Church grew and then remained more or less stable. However, practice and church attendance soon decreased. Since the late 1990s practising religiously literate Catholics committed to the teaching of the Church have constituted around 10 per cent of people who identify with Catholicism (Žiliukaitė, Poviliūnas and Savicka 2016; Kuznecovienė, Rutkienė, and Ališauskienė 2016). Thus, cultural Catholicism, understood as a religious identification, discourse and expression of a primarily cultural nature and separated from belief in faith content and participation in religious rituals sanctioned by religious authorities (Astor and Mayrl 2020), prevails in Lithuania. This type of religiosity, at least in part, frames the anti-genderist strategies of Church-related NGOs that have taken over the anti-genderist initiative from the clergy since the 2000s. The two most influential actors, the National Association of Families and Parents and the Institute of Free Society, predominantly use non-religious (scientific, legal and common-sense) arguments and usually avoid explicitly religious argumentation or references to the Church in their anti-genderist discourse. Such a strategy may be effective in a society where only a minority of the population is committed to religious teaching and, thus, is often employed by religious organisations effectively acting in the civil society of secularized countries (Bruce 2002). Indeed, these NGOs follow the lobbying tactics of pressure groups in civil society, consequently obscuring the religious nature of their endeavours.

A large part of the Lithuanian population recognises Catholicism as an element of national identity and supports the association between nationalism and cultural Catholicism. This image is also attractive to a considerable part of the clergy, especially to representatives of the older generation who experienced Soviet persecution. This kind of nationalistic and cultural Catholicism prevails as an element of the Lithuanian national identity, which enhances Catholicism's suitability to be combined with populist anti-genderist discourses and actions and enables collaboration between the clergy and populist actors.

At the same time, there are Lithuanian Catholics who, to different extents, do not support the conservative anti-genderist agenda pursued by the Church. For instance, some members of the clergy and laity, urban intellectuals in particular, follow the conservative agenda but are cautious about too close ties between Church and state/nationalism and, instead, emphasise belonging to what they call Christian Europe and its civilisation (Subačius 2015). Additionally, anti-genderist initiatives based on the Christian persecution discourse refer to yet another vision of Christianity in Lithuania and the world, which is analysed below.

The self-understandings of conservative Catholics as respectively nationalist, cultural and European have co-existed in Lithuania since 1990, and the idea of embattled Christianity has gained popularity in the last decade.

THE LITHUANIAN PERSECUTION DISCOURSE: TOMAS VILUCKAS AND HIS LAIKMETIS.LT

A number of publications referring to the persecution of Christians, including – or mostly – overseas cases, have appeared in the Lithuanian Catholic media at least since the early 2010s. Some Catholic politicians were interested in the persecution of Christians in Christian-minority countries. For example, in 2015, Mantas Adomėnas, a Catholic member of the Lithuanian Parliament, initiated a resolution condemning the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities in Iraq and Syria (Religija 2015). In 2018, Laima Andrikiienė, another member of the Parliament, invited representatives of the Vatican-related charity Aid to the Church in Need

to discuss the persecution of Christians with delegates of the Lithuanian Catholic Church, the Government and the Parliament (Mitė 2018). References to the persecution of Christians in association with gender issues have come up in the discourse developed by Catholic Church-related NGOs. The Institute of Free Society has published some papers addressing Christian religious freedom and organised events with overseas speakers who have tackled the issue since its inception in 2013, with a spike in the number of published texts from 2017-2019.

The references to persecution and its association with gender issues became much more frequent at the turn of the 2020s and in the heated public debates regarding the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the Law on Partnership of 2021-2022. As the rhetoric and attacks on LGBTQ+ people and gender-equality initiatives became increasingly extreme, some people started reporting hate speech and anti-genderist statements, including cases that involved clergy and Church-related people, and liberal politicians attempted to introduce harsher punishments for hate speech. In this context, more publications framing the issue as a persecution of Christians appeared in the Lithuanian Christian and right-wing media, with Tomas Viluckas taking a leading role in the promotion of this persecution discourse. Viluckas is a disabled lay Catholic residing in Palanga who converted to Catholicism in his twenties and became actively engaged in activities of the Church. He participated in organising Catholic events in the diocese of Telšiai and wrote texts presenting Catholic commentaries on a variety of issues for the mass media in the early 2000s. In his texts, he analysed problems facing the Church and eagerly criticised its hierarchies and clergy, which were positively received in Catholic and secular mainstream media outlets, and he became a widely respected Catholic observer. However, he lost this status when his critique turned increasingly radical; he got involved in a populist movement, “*Drašiasus kelias*,” and participated in the 2012 parliamentary elections (Subačius 2015).

Viluckas started his engagement with the persecution discourse in the early 2010s (for example, Viluckas 2013). He developed it and published a plethora of texts to back his claim of the massive scale of Christian persecution. His eventual experience of the refusal by mass and Christian media outlets to publish his texts (or censorship, as he called it) led him to establish his own news portal, *Laikmetis.lt*, in 2021. The website has Persecution of Christians as one of 5 subcategories under the main menu category Current Concerns of the Church⁶. The subcategory has a few original texts, mostly written by Viluckas. The majority of the publications on Christian persecution are translations or adaptations of texts published by various, mostly English, but also Lithuanian and Russian, Christian and mainstream media outlets. Major Christian media outlets include the US-based *The Christian Post*, UK-based *Christianity Today*, *Vatican News*, *Asia News* and a website of the US-based organisation *International Christian Concern* (*persecution.org*). The mainstream media he used included *BNS*, *CNA* and others.

Understanding the prevalence of this discourse within the Lithuanian anti-genderist movement requires further research. Nevertheless, several Catholic media outlets and websites by anti-genderist organisations, such as the Institute of Free Society, repost texts published on *Laikmetis*. In this way, the website serves as a starting point for the circulation and broadcasting of the persecution frame among Lithuanian Catholics. Some Catholics, for example, *Ramūnas Aušrotas*, a representative of the Institute, developed the discourse further by employing human rights language. Other Catholic publications, however, question the discourse (for example, *Bendžius* 2021).

The cases presented in *Laikmetis* provide an opportunity to employ the persecution discourse for various purposes (for example, anti-immigration mobilisation, etc.), but so far, it seems that the anti-genderist activists have made the most use of this potential. Indeed, the

⁶ The other subcategories are Christianity in the World, Church in Lithuania, Events and Pope Francis.

discourse is a basis for the activities of the Christian Professional Union of Lithuania, which was established in July 2021. The Union claims that it is working for the protection of the rights of Christian employees in Lithuania and presents gender equality policies as a major threat to these rights. It reposts texts from Laikmetis on its website, and its representatives consistently refer to cases of persecution from other countries in their public comments. For example, to explain why the Union is needed, its chairman Audrius Globys evoked both the Lithuanian draft laws on gender-related issues and their counterparts in other countries: “So far Christian worldview has not yet been outlawed in Lithuania, because we do not have the laws I mentioned. They would be used in an attempt to “re-educate” Christians, to make them obedient to the dominant ideology rather than Christ, and to silence them. However, we can see how the mentioned laws are bulldozed to pass them, and how actively propaganda is propagated in the mass media in Lithuania. Very soon our country may also have “hard Christianophobia” that gains more and more ground in countries where these laws have already been implemented successfully” (quoted in Bendžius 2021).

Viluckas and other key figures of the Union are well-known Catholics who address a majority-Catholic Lithuanian society using cases from countries with different denominational and religious landscapes. This begs a few questions: are the denominations of the persecuted Christians in these cases important for the broadcasters of the discourse? How do they deal with the denominational affiliations of the protagonists in the cases they report? What “Christianity” are they constructing, and what relations with other religious groups emerge in the discourse as they present it?

CHRISTIANS PERSECUTED OVER GENDER POLITICS

On April 30, 2022, the subcategory of Christian Persecution on the Laikmetis website included 34 publications related to gender politics. These texts inform the reader about Christians losing their jobs and students suspended from their studies because of their expression of conservative gender views or refusal to use preferred gender pronouns. Some report about people being prosecuted over hate speech, incitement of hatred or refusal to sell goods or provide services to LGBTQ+ people. Others talk about the restrictions applied to Christian events and activities that promote conservative views on gender. Most reports refer to developments that occurred in North American and European Christian-majority countries, predominantly in the US, the UK and Finland. The texts tend not to show much interest in their protagonists’ denominational affiliations and, instead, focus on the details of their actions, the actions applied against them and their Christian commitment to stand against “gender ideology” (see Table 1). Just under a majority of the reports on gender politics-related cases never make any reference or provide any clues to their protagonists’ denomination; they are referred to simply as Christians.

Denominations	Total	Western Europe, including Lithuania	Gender politics-related
Christians	53	23	15
Catholics	66	28	6
Non-Catholics, denomination not specified	16	4	4
Non-Catholics, denomination specified	38	15	13
Number of papers	157	63	34

Table 1. Denominational affiliation of the protagonists, their supporters and defenders in cases presented under the subcategory of Christian Persecution on Laikmetis (some papers mention more than one category).

In some publications, however, the protagonists' denominational affiliations are specified or may be guessed based on various clues. Thus, the reader can find out about actions against a UK Christian who was an elder of the Stirling Free Church (Laikmetis 1.08.2021) or the support shown to a UK pastor by the Methodist Church (Laikmetis 6.05.2021). In the case of clergy, protagonists belonging to a Catholic or non-Catholic denomination are marked by referring to them as priests or pastors, with or without the specific names of their denominations. The majority of gender politics-related cases from outside Lithuania deal with developments involving Christians other than Catholics. The number of references to Catholics is extremely low: only six out of 34 publications mention Catholics and five of these cases are related to Lithuania. Catholics mostly feature in publications in the violence category: physical violence against believers and attacks against the property of religious institutions in Western countries in particular.

These numbers for the protagonists of different denominations should not be taken as an indication of differences when it comes to their engagement in the fight against "gender ideology" or the general persecution discourse. The low number of references to Catholics can be explained, at least in part, by the sources used in Laikmetis reports on gender politics-related persecution: the main sources are multid denominational Evangelical news websites, like the US-based Christian Post and the UK-based Christianity Today. While it is impossible to track and check all of the sources used by Viluckas to produce Laikmetis publications, it seems that, in most cases, he follows the pattern of (non)indication when it comes to specific denominations, even if it is indicated in the sources. For example, the publication on Keith Waters refers to him as a UK pastor in Laikmetis (Laikmetis 30.04.2022), while the source publication in The Christian Post presents him as an Evangelical pastor (Alcindor 2022). The republishing of translated and slightly edited texts from several Christian media outlets from various countries transfers international or national hierarchies of Christian denominations and interdenominational relations to Lithuania, which may then affect the development of the persecution discourse. At the same time, there is a process of selection: Laikmetis has not republished *all* the available material, even when republishing from the websites Viluckas uses most. It is beyond the scope of this paper to look at what Christian denominations are included and what denominations are excluded in the persecution discourse developed in Viluckas's source media, or which reports published in the source media he selects to republish and which reports he excludes. Nevertheless, his use of the umbrella term Christians may denote a person belonging to any Christian denomination or not affiliated with any. As such, the term serves well in the Lithuanian Catholic-majority context. With Catholics figuring in a minority of the reports on gender politics-related persecution, Lithuanian Catholic readers can identify more easily with persecuted Christian communities represented by denominationally undefined protagonists.

The Lithuanian persecution discourse does classify Christians, however, though this is not based on their denominations. The relevant classification comes to the fore in the reporting on the trial of Lutheran Finish politician Päivi Räsänen and Bishop Juhana Pohjola over charges of incitement of hatred. The trial was the most prominent case related to gender politics in Laikmetis and in other Lithuanian Christian and mainstream media. Laikmetis published nine rather detailed reports on the topic; other incidents have received much less attention (no more than three publications per case). The reports refer to Pohjola as an Evangelical Lutheran bishop and mention Räsänen's links with the bishop (and various bodies he is involved in) but usually present her as a Finish Christian or a Christian politician rather than as a Lutheran (see, for example, Laikmetis 18.01.2022, Laikmetis 30.03.2022). Moreover, as the case received considerable attention, the reports provided more details on the Finish Evangelical Lutheran Church and, accordingly, some clues for understanding the issue of denominations and alternative groupings of Christians. The case concerned not only the supposed discrimination of Christians by secular authorities but also a conflict within the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran

Church: Pohjola and his supporters objected to the support the Church showed towards the LGBTQ+ Pride March and women's ordination. As Viluckas's report put it, "The Finnish State Church began engaging in open disobedience to Christian teaching about gender differences during the sexual revolution of the 1960s. When the state Church established tenets of anti-Christian culture, Christians started to distance themselves from it and to follow loyal pastors such as Pohjola"; Pohjola was banned from his church and established a congregation that adhered to a "traditional Christian point of view" (Laikmetis 4.12.2021). Denominational differences matter little here. Instead, the discourse establishes a distinction between true and not true Christianity, first of all, according to attitudes towards gender issues. True Christianity is represented by Christians who follow their faith faithfully and are opposed to those who share liberal views, tend to make compromises and mostly keep their faith private, again, primarily in reference to gender-related convictions. In the texts reporting the Finnish case, the producers of the discourse noticeably did not make direct comparisons with the Lithuanian Catholic Church. But they appear to acknowledge the distinction between true and not true Christianity, both regarding the Lithuanian clergy (sometimes accused of passivity⁷) and definitely regarding lay Catholics who have not yet joined the anti-genderist fight in its various guises.

The term Christians denotes a common identity that, at least in theory, encompasses all Christian denominations in an egalitarian way. At the same time, it obscures differences and hides majority and minority statuses and power positions among Christian denominations; it does not allow less influential denominations to claim leadership in national or transnational gender politics. This is obvious in the texts presenting Lithuanian issues and initiatives based on the persecution discourse: the texts rather explicitly build on and support the hierarchy of Christian denominations established in Catholic-majority Lithuania. Five out of six texts linked to Lithuania are, in one way or another, related to gender politics. One reports the case of Loreta Raudytė, a teacher of confessional religious education from Telšiai; another reports the founding of the Christian Professional Union, and the other three texts are reactions to the Räsänen trial.

As a teacher of religious education, Raudytė was under investigation for incitement of hatred because of her representation of LGBTQ+ people in a lesson she gave in 2017. The case was ultimately dropped, and the teacher received a reprimand but was able to continue working at her school. In Laikmetis's reporting on the issue, there are no explicit references to Raudytė's denominational affiliation. Readers, however, might understand her position from her story about the Catholic hierarchs who supported her. She also explained why she had joined the Christian Professional Union, explicitly using the term "Christians": "Christians who experience attacks need support and help" (Filipavičiūtė-Navikauskė 2022). In this case, Christianity is most probably identified with Catholicism as the majority church of Lithuania.

Three calls for solidarity published in reaction to the Räsänen and Pohjola trial are similar in the way they describe the protagonists' denominational affiliations. The texts refer to Räsänen by her positions within secular state institutions and by her Christian faith; they refer to Pohjola as a bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The first text is an ecumenical appeal originally published by the Vilnius Archdiocese of the Lithuanian Catholic Church. The appeal concluded an ecumenical week of prayer for the unity of "all Christians" and aimed "to support with their prayers those who are persecuted because of their faith and beliefs" (Laikmetis 26.01.2022). It mentioned "our sisters and brothers" persecuted throughout the world, but Räsänen and Pohjola received special attention. The appeal was signed by delegates from eight denominations: the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church,

⁷ For example, the Catholic hierarchy as a whole and some hierarchs and priests in particular were reluctant to support the initiatives of populist anti-genderist actors or to defend clergymembers accused of incitement of hatred against LGBTQ+ individuals.

the Free Christian Church, the New Apostolic Church, the Evangelical Reformed Church, the Evangelical Adventist Church and the Greek Orthodox Church. Notably, the list of signees includes delegates from both privileged (traditional and state-recognised) and non-privileged Christian denominations (here represented by the Free Christian Church).

Audrius Globys and priest Algirdas Toliatas, representatives of the Christian Professional Union, also published their calls for support for Räsänen and Pojhola. Globys briefly presented the well-known case, explained its significance for Lithuania⁸ and addressed Lithuanian Christians. In his words, “We ask Lithuanian Christians to express solidarity with Finnish Christians” and to sign a petition to the Finnish Prosecutor General (Laikmetis 17.01.2022). In his call, Toliatas paid less attention to the relevance of the case in the Lithuanian context. Instead, he reminded the reader of Pope Francis’s intention to pray for persecuted Christians and called “to join a prayer for Lutheran bishop Juhana Pohjola and Päivi Räsänen, a member of the Finnish Parliament and a former Finnish interior minister, who are on trial in Finland” (Laikmetis 24.01.2022).

Such actions of solidarity break the isolationist position and national boundaries of the Lithuanian Catholic community and change its relationship with Christians of other countries. The calls to action do not refer to de-localised cases of persecution as if to save one’s own national Christian community from the threat of “gender ideology.” Instead, they encourage an active relationship with other Christians and inspire feelings of belonging to a transnational Christian community – i.e., the community of “true” persecuted Christians.

The report on the founding of the Christian Professional Union also stresses interdenominationalism but highlights the leading role of Catholics in interdenominational relations and their power to define what denominations are included as Christians. The report consists of comments from the three initiators of the organisation: Globys, Toliatas, and Alvydas Jokubaitis. Toliatas is presented as a priest, and this title signals his Catholic affiliation; the other two are not characterised as Catholics or Christians. In their comments, however, they talk about Christians and religious people that Lithuanian readers can identify as Catholics. It seems that the author of the text and the initiators of the Union question the popular Lithuanian identification of Christianity with Catholicism by emphasising the interdenominational nature of the organisation: “The founders of Christocentric Professional Union point out that it is inter-confessional, thus, all Christians, regardless of a denomination they belong, can join the Union” (Laikmetis 21.07.2021). However, the Christianity of the Union is hardly all-encompassing. Rather, the actors promoting the discourse are defining what denominations and groups are considered Christian. On its website, the Union clearly states that only Christians belonging to traditional religious communities, as defined by the Lithuanian law on religious communities and associations, can be its members. Thus, when dealing with the Lithuanian context and operationalising the persecution discourse, its promoters use it as a means to reproduce the hierarchy of Christian denominations in Lithuania.⁹

Reports on persecution related to gender politics constitute only around one-fifth of the total reports on Christian persecution in the Laikmetis portal. However, I argue that other cases of persecution are an essential context for the construction of Christianity and

⁸ According to Globys, the case “creates a legal precedent that can also become relevant in Lithuania”, if the Parliament adopts laws regarding gender-neutral partnerships, ratifies the Convention and allows to use of the law on hate speech as “a legal instrument for the restriction of the freedom of conscience, religion, and speech of Lithuanian citizens” (Laikmetis 17.01.2022).

⁹ See also the sixth report on Lithuanian developments: it presented concerns over the restrictions of freedom of religion on the Internet expressed by representatives of three Christian denominations that have a status of state-recognised religion: Mindaugas Sabutis, a bishop of the Lithuanian Evangelical Lutheran Church, Gintaras Sungaila, a Russian Orthodox priest, and Tomas Viluckas whose affiliation with the Catholic Church is not mentioned, but is probably supposed to be known to readers (Laikmetis 10.07.2022).

interdenominational and interreligious relations in this gender politics-related persecution discourse.

THE PERSECUTION RELATED TO GENDER POLITICS WITHIN THE WIDER CONTEXT OF THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

The Christianity constructed in the Christian persecution discourse is transnational, far exceeding the boundaries not only of a national community but even the broadest visions of Lithuanian Christians who identify Christianity with European civilisation. When looking at the reports under the subcategory of Christian Persecution as a whole, we can see a much wider variety of countries and regions covered (see Table 2). Only six publications are, in some way, related to Lithuania. Around half of the reported cases come from Christian-minority countries in Africa and Asia; around a third speak of incidents in North American and European Christian-majority countries; some report on persecution in Christian-majority countries elsewhere. The cases reported, let alone the regions of the world in which they took place, differ greatly, present different kinds of persecution and serve different functions in the discourse.

Regions of the cases reported	Number of reports
Lithuania	6
North American and European Christian-majority countries, excluding Lithuania	57
Kosovo	1
Latin American countries	8
Belarus	1
Ukraine	5
Africa and Asia	77
Global reports	2
Total	157

Table 2. Regions and/or countries of the cases presented under the subcategory of Christian Persecution in the Laikmetis portal.

First, there are many more Catholics mentioned in cases of other types of persecution. In this way, the broader context helps to increase the weight of the denomination that is particularly important for most Lithuanians in the persecution discourse addressed to them.

Further, only four cases from regions other than North American and European Christian-majority countries are directly related to gender politics (see Table 3). Nevertheless, to stress the alleged importance of perceived persecution over gender politics, the discourse links these cases with attacks of completely different kinds. For example, cases from Asian and African Christian-minority countries deal with physical violence against individual Christians and their communities. Usually lacking in the presentation of their wider contexts, these accounts are full of gruesome details about brutal attacks and violence, ranging from poisoning, beheading and fleeing to save one's life to long-term imprisonment. For example, a report on the massacre of at least 35 Christians by Myanmar's military on Christmas Eve 2021 highlights quotes like: "We were shocked to see that the bodies of killed people were of different sizes, including of children, women and elderly people", "I saw burned children and women's corpses and clothes scattered around", "Today is December 25, the day of Christmas, the important day of celebration and peace for the world. However, today the junta that is committing the genocide made their choice..." and "we hope that all nations and governments of the world will condemn these actions" (Laikmetis 28.12.2021). Reports on these incidents illustrate the

terror and brutality of persecution experienced by Christians¹⁰ with the implication that this is somehow relatable to the local context.

Types of persecution reported	Number of reports in total	Number of reports on cases in North American and European Christian-majority countries
Physical violence against Christians and their property	113	19
Restrictions on the visibility of Christian symbols	5	5
Other restrictions	8	6
Actions related to gender politics	34	30
Total	157	57

Table 3. Types of persecution in cases presented under the subcategory of Christian Persecution on Laikmetis (some publications refer to more than one type of persecution).

Some cases from Western European and North American countries also deal with violence against Christian individuals and the property of Christian institutions, as well as the restrictions on religious activities and the visibility of religious symbols. Together with Asian and African cases, these reports are essential for portraying Christianity as the most persecuted religion in the world and to form the basis of interreligious relations constructed within the discourse. Sometimes, the perpetrators or facilitators of violence against Christians in Asian and African contexts are secular state agents, such as the Myanmar army, the Chinese Communist regime or passive state actors in Kenya. But both in Christian-minority countries and in the West, according to this discourse, Christian individuals primarily suffer from the actions of other religious groups and individuals. Muslim attacks on Christians in Muslim-majority countries represent a considerable number of cases reported on Laikmetis; Viluckas also mentions them in his original texts. In Western contexts, Muslims are described as performing attacks of various natures: physical violence, threats of explosion, disruption of services or harassment related to the wearing of Christian symbols and other public expressions of Christian identity. Muslims also often feature as a religious group that is treated exclusively well compared to Christians. A couple of reports based on Vatican media refer to discrimination against Muslims and religious groups other than Christians but still call for recognising the discrimination experienced by Christians in Western Christian-majority countries (for example, Laikmetis 12.12.2021). In general, though, this discourse ignores the persecution of other religious communities and presents them as hostile to Christians. Unsurprisingly, Muslims dominate as the imagined religious persecutors, and in this regard, the Lithuanian producers of this discourse follow the anti-Muslim attitudes of the broader persecution discourse. However, other groups, such as Hindus or Pagan-animalists in India, also feature in the role of persecutors, constituting essentially all other religions as hostile to Christians. The discourse denies any possibility of dialogue, alliance or mutual action and, in this way, fits well within a nationalist-populist discourse that is based on a nationalistic Catholicism that treats Islam as a threat.

These cases of physical violence against Christians form an essential context of the presentation and interpretation of the persecution related to gender politics that is reported in a rather small number of publications dealing with the Western context. Though texts on cases from various regions of the world can be separated for purposes of analysis, and, indeed, they differ significantly, nevertheless, they are important as a whole. The placement in the menu

¹⁰ Some publications reported on the murder of Christians when there was no evidence, references or even explicit assumptions made in the text that these victims were attacked because of their Christian faith. For example, one report (Laikmetis 17.06.2021) presented a case of a priest killed by people from drug cartels.

of categories on the Laikmetis website establishes the persecution of Christians as an issue of extreme importance. This label guides the interpretation of all content presented under it. Moreover, the category creates links between diverse cases, and each variance gives some clues about how the others should be understood. At least by 2019, Viluckas recognised that the “soft persecution” of the liberal ideology “does not match tortures experienced by the first martyrs who died in Rome, by fellow Lithuanians after the war,¹¹ or Christians crucified by ISIS fighters in Syria.” “The real danger”, according to him, was “not the demons of hatred that threaten Christians, but the temptation to nod our heads and, in this way, to join the persecutors” (Viluckas 2019). In 2021-2022, cases of “soft persecution” over an anti-genderist stance were put together with reports on massacres of Christians under one label, “Christian persecution,” without any commentary, making the former equivalent to the latter. In turn, the Western cases, most of which are related to anti-genderist endeavours, provide Lithuanian readers with a vocabulary and drop hints about ways of thinking about gender issues in their national context.

CONCLUSIONS

Prompted by developments in the country’s gender politics, the Lithuanian Christian persecution discourse developed primarily as an anti-genderist strategy. It establishes the public anti-genderist fight as an essential Christian right and obligation, complements the repertoire used by Lithuanian anti-genderist actors and offers an alternative way to think of religion, gender and society. Compared to other Lithuanian anti-genderist strategies, this discourse brings religion to the frontlines of the anti-genderist fight.

The Christian persecution discourse developed in Laikmetis and operationalised by the Christian Professional Union of Lithuania can be regarded as the biggest exposure that Lithuanian Catholics have to Christians in Africa and Asia and to a diversity of Christian denominations. The interdenominational and interreligious relations constructed in the discourse are dependent on the use of predominantly US and UK Evangelical media sources and making few references to persecuted Catholics and Lithuanian cases. By selecting cases featuring persecution of various types from all over the world, not explicitly referring to the denominational affiliations of these cases’ protagonists and instead using the preferred generic description, “Christians”, this discourse portrays Christianity as a transnational, multid denominational community that is persecuted both by secular actors and other religious groups. Interreligious relations are constructed through broadcasting cases from Western and non-Western countries as being based on the hostility from other religious groups towards Christians or the preferential treatment of the former by secular actors. Relations with other Christians depend not so much on their denominations as on their willingness to witness their anti-genderist stance. This stance is what grounds solidarity with persecuted Christians. In other words, Christians persecuted in Christian-minority countries themselves do not increase solidarity but serve more as a context to interpret the Christian anti-genderist fight.

The adaptation of a discourse developed by US and UK conservative Evangelical actors to the Lithuanian religious landscape presents a paradox. On the one hand, the specific version of Christianity constructed by the discourse challenges the vision of nationalist Catholicism, the dominant anti-genderist endeavours based on it and the general equation of Christianity with Catholicism. On the other hand, the main broadcasters and developers of this discourse in Lithuania are Catholics who are targeting mostly the Catholic population and enjoying the status quo of Catholicism’s dominance in the country. The preferred term “Christians” is ambiguous, and while it prompts solidarity with other Christian denominations, it also

¹¹ Viluckas refers to the post-WW2 period when the Soviet Union carried out mass violence in Lithuania to establish the Soviet regime in the country.

obscures and reproduces the hierarchy of Christian denominations established in the religious landscape of Catholic-majority Lithuania.

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