Fraternity versus Parochialism: On Religion and Populism

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Abstract: The relationship between populism and religion is complex because populists hijack religion but are often more interested in belonging than believing. This is one reason why there is a growing distance between populists and many leaders of mainline churches. To understand this complex field, we have to take social crises seriously and see how a static religion is, according to Henri Bergson, the first response to the precariousness of human life. This type of religion has led to closed societies leaning toward pseudospeciation and parochial altruism. Bergson, however, did not only describe static religion but also recognized dynamic religion leading to an open society. Jesus Christ’s Sermon on the Mount, with its call to love one’s enemy, is his key example. By going beyond Bergson, we can recognize dynamic religion as the mystic core of all world religions. Dynamic religion enables a universal fraternity, which is an essential element of every democracy in overcoming its populist temptations by respecting, internally, the rights of minorities and, externally, the universal human rights. Three examples from different religious backgrounds show how dynamic religion supports democracy through fraternity: the fraternal tradition in modern Catholicism, the Muslim philosopher S.B. Diagne and the Hindu M.K. Gandhi.

Keywords: religion; populism; democracy; fraternity; pseudospeciation; parochial altruism; spirituality; Catholic church; M.K. Gandhi; S.B. Diagne

1. Introduction

Populism adds to the vertical critic of elites a horizontal “us” versus “them”. An imagined homogenous people distinguishes itself from all foreign others, often also claiming its own superiority. Frequently, religion plays a role in this self-understanding of people who feel threatened by religious or cultural others. Such alliances between populist movements and religion contribute to the new visibility of religion that characterizes our world of today. Many examples illustrate this observation at least at a first glance. We can refer to a populist politician like Donald Trump who was supported by 81% of white evangelical Christians and 60% of white Catholics in the U.S. presidential elections in 2016 (Martínez and Smith 2016). Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalist policy in India also illustrates a problematic amalgamation of populism and religion. In Europe, many rightwing populist parties have begun to embrace Christianity to convince people that they have to defend their nations against an “Islamization”. One can refer in this regard especially to movements in Hungary, Poland, and Italy. Germany and Austria are also countries in which right-wing parties like the AfD (Alternative for Germany) or the FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria) claim a growing affinity with Christianity to support their fight against Islam. Even centrist parties in these two countries show a growing tendency to emphasize Christianity as its “lead culture” (Leitkultur). Recep Erdogan’s nationalist and populist policy in Turkey provides us with a Muslim example of an alliance between populism and religion. This list is, of course, not complete, but exemplary.
Populism is also an offspring of social or political crises. Several major crises in recent decades have contributed to the rise of populist movements or populist policies in recent decades. A first such crisis was the end of the Cold War that challenged the identity of many Western countries, which lost their communist enemy from whom they distinguished themselves. Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations* was an attempt to propose a new world order strongly based on religiously defined cultural identities (Huntington 1996). In many European countries, a search for a new enemy started immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall. One option that began at that time was to distinguish Europe from Islam as its main enemy (Ash 2001). The terrorist attacks of 9/11 and those acts of terrorism that followed in the years afterward strengthened this populist view of the world and turned it into a widespread pattern of today (Roy 2016b, p. 186). The financial crises of 2007/2008 enhanced the attractiveness of populist positions too. In Europe, the refugee crisis of 2015 helped populist parties enormously in winning voters (Roy 2016b, p. 187). Migration was also one of the key issues addressed by Donald Trump to win the presidential election in the U.S. in 2016. The current coronavirus pandemic is again threatening democracies and is a dangerous opportunity for populists (McCormick 2020b).

The relation between populist movements and religion is complex and does not follow a single or simple pattern. Even though Evangelicals and many Catholics voted for Trump in 2016, this does not mean that religion, as such, was the key motive for this support. Data show that the economy was for Evangelicals, for instance, more important than specific religious issues like abortion or LGBTQ rights (Pally 2020, pp. 13–14). Trump’s example also shows how the populist hijacking of religion often meets strong resistance from church leaders. His recent posing with a Bible in front of St. John’s Church in Washington or his later visit to the Saint John Paul II National Shrine was sharply criticized by the Episcopal Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde and the Catholic Archbishop Wilton Gregory (Crowley and Dias 2020; Budde 2020). There are movements like the Austrian Freedom Party, which shifted from an anticlerical attitude to an embracement of Christianity to position itself against “Islamization” (Hadj-Abdou 2016). In Italy, the Lega Nord celebrated its pagan roots before it moved closer to Catholicism and the Front National in France has gone beyond its former leanings toward fundamentalist Catholics by opening up to secular opponents of Islam, migration, and the European Union (McDonnell 2016; Roy 2016a). Despite all these differences among populist movements, it is a fact that almost all of them oppose Islam and address “Islamization” as the most dangerous threat (Roy 2016b, p. 187). The political scientist Olivier Roy observes in his summary of several case studies on populism and religion that these movements understand religion primarily as an identity marker and not so much as faith (Roy 2016b). He justly claims that there are “Europeans for whom Christianity is an identity reference and not at all a religious reference” (Roy 2019, p. 38). This lack of faith or a real religious commitment also becomes obvious in the particular defense many populists express for Christianity over Islam. They “defend churches against mosques, as long as they remain empty, or at least quiet” (Roy 2019, p. 121). It is due to this lack of a real engagement with the Christian message that a growing distance has emerged between representatives of mainline churches and populist movements (Roy 2019, pp. 118–24). Whereas church leaders emphasize “faith” and “believing”, populists focus on “identity” and “belonging” (Roy 2016b, pp. 190–93). A telling example for this growing distance is the harsh critique that Vienna’s Cardinal Christoph Schönborn expressed during a sermon in 2009 against the Austrian Freedom Party’s use of the cross for anti-migration propaganda because of its clear contradiction of the Christian call to love one’s enemy (Roy 2016b, p. 195; Roy 2019, p. 123). Similarly, when the Italian populist Matteo Salvini “brandished” the rosary during a rally for the May 2019 European parliamentary elections to recover Europe’s Christian roots, Italian Catholic leaders criticized this “exploitation of religion” that knows “no decency” (McCormick 2020a, p. 1). Additionally, Trump’s photo opportunity with a Bible in front of a church demonstrated his identification with Evangelicals in the sense of belonging without showing, at the same time, signs of believing. He neither read the Bible nor did he enter the church to pray.

The systematic question that arises if we try to understand the relationship between populism and religion must focus on the specific role of religion. Are religions the main cause of nationalist
populism or are they just hijacked by politicians to maximize their electoral votes? There is no doubt that politicians use religions to gain votes if doing this seems to open a path to success. Successful use of religion, however, demands that it causes an echo among the people. A certain religious disposition must be present among the people so that politicians can exploit it. In the following, I will reflect anthropologically on those deep-rooted religious patterns that explain, to a certain degree, the populist hijacking of religion and will, at the same time, also show that these patterns are not inevitable, because a very different type of religion that can be found at the core of all world religions challenges exactly these patterns. After underlining the necessity to take crisis in our theoretical reflections seriously, I will follow Henri Bergson’s important distinction between static and dynamic religion to respond to the question of in what way religious patterns make a populist hijacking of religion more likely and in what way religion can become an antidote to populism.

2. An Anthropological Emphasis to Take Crisis Seriously

The following anthropological investigation starts with the fact that populism capitalizes on crises. The main problem in this regard is the dominant tendency to treat crises as nothing but exceptional interruptions of the normal way of the world. This neglect of the ever-present dangers that make human life precarious and uncertain, however, plays into the hands of populists who claim to know how they can secure life forever. It is therefore important to stress the ever-present precariousness of human life as Hannah Arendt did when she underlined that our capability to act explains that “uncertainty” is the “decisive character of human affairs” (Arendt 1998, p. 232). Arendt saw uncertainty as an essential dimension of the modern world, but that does not mean that it is not part of the human condition as such. René Girard pointed in a similar direction when he insisted on the “fragility of human relations” that are caused by always possible mimetic rivalries and challenged social scientists to consider conflicts as “normal” and not as “something accidental” (Girard 2001, pp. 10–11). The current coronavirus pandemic is just one example how quickly our normal ways of life can be put in jeopardy. Albert Camus’s novel The Plague underlined human uncertainty as an ongoing condition that needs to be recognized. This novel surely addressed allegorically the Nazi occupation of France but, on a deeper level, it deals especially with the “absurd” that is caused by death and human violence and that has to be resisted by all means (Merton 1985, pp. 181–217). The ending of Camus’ novel expresses the remaining precariousness of human life as its main character, Dr. Rieux, knows that his chronicle about the plague “could not be a story of definitive victory” (Camus 2002, p. 237). The joy that rose in the city after the plague ended “was always under threat” because “the plague bacillus never dies or vanishes entirely”. What has been done by fighting the pestilence “would have to be done again”. Human rivalries and human mortality, the threats that Camus described as pestilence, remain dormant potentials for crises that will not recede forever. The neglect of death is one of the shortcomings of all thinking, which is not prepared to face crises. Famous is the opening of Franz Rosenzweig’s Star of Redemption that highlights philosophy’s neglect of death:

All cognition of the All originates in death, in the fear of death. Philosophy takes it upon itself to throw off the fear of things earthly, to rob death of its poisonous sting, and Hades of its pestilential breath. All that is mortal lives in this fear of death; […] But philosophy denies these fears of the earth. (Rosenzweig 1985, p. 3)

Rosenzweig was forced by the crises of the First World War to reflect on death profoundly when he wrote this book on small postcards in the Macedonian trenches (Taubes 2004, p. 64).

Henri Bergson’s philosophical anthropology underlines the fundamental precariousness of human life. He mentions especially the “dissolving power of intelligence”, the “inevitability of death”, and the “depressing margin of the unexpected”, which contribute to it (Bergson 1977, pp. 122, 131, 140):

Man is the only animal whose actions are uncertain, who hesitates, gropes about, and lays plans in the hope of success and the fear of failure. He is alone in realizing that he is subject to illness, alone in knowing that he must die. (Bergson 1977, p. 204)
Bergson’s insight into humanity’s uncertainty explains why he viewed war as the underlying possibility in seeking peace as diseases relate to health. Very close to Girard’s remark that social scientists should dare to recognize conflicts as normal, Bergson maintained that even if wars are “rare or exceptional” they are “normal” and not “abnormal” (Bergson 1977, p. 31, cf. 277; Lefebvre 2013, pp. 6–14; Girard 2001, pp. 10–11). Bergson’s emphasis on crisis explains his insight into the religious response that humanity found in its initial stages.

3. Static Religion Supporting Pseudospeciation and Parochial Altruism

Life’s precariousness and uncertainty led, according, to Bergson to the emergence of early religions, which helped to contain these threats. He called these early religions “static religion” and described them as “a defensive reaction of nature against what might be depressing for the individual, and dissolvent for society” (Bergson 1977, p. 205). Static religions emerged with early tribal societies, with their strong internal cohesion enforced by group pressure and a common enmity to everything outside the group. Early human sociability was, according to Bergson, organized in a way “that the group be closely united, but that between group and group there should be virtual hostility; we were always to be prepared for attack or defense” (Bergson 1977, p. 57). Every closed society claimed its own superiority against all others and saw itself forced to a preemptive defense: “What binds together the members of a given society is tradition, the need and the determination to defend the group against other groups and to set it above everything.” (Bergson 1977, p. 206)

The amalgamation of closed societies and static religion was an early and very common way to respond to human mortality and the uncertainties of human life. Different thinkers and scientific approaches have confirmed Bergson’s insight. In the 1960s, the German-American developmental psychologist Erik Erikson coined the term “pseudospeciation” to describe social groupings that were very close to Bergson’s description of closed societies and were immediately accepted by behavioral scientists like Konrad Lorenz, Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, or Melvin Konner (Erikson 1966; Lorenz 1966; Lorenz 1973, pp. 223–45; Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1972, p. 40; Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1979, p. 123; Konner 2015). Erikson described the fact that cultural evolution shows a division of humanity into “pseudospecies” in the following way:

The term denotes the fact that while man is obviously one species, he appears and continues on earth split up into groups (from tribes to nations, from castes to classes, from religions to ideologies), which provide their members with a firm sense of God-given identity—and a sense of immortality. (Erikson 1975, p. 176)

Erikson’s definition of pseudospeciation addresses the main elements that Bergson observed in his description of closed societies: the religiously strengthened claim of superiority answering to human mortality.

Ernest Becker’s cultural anthropology and terror management theory confirms today that belonging to a superior religious group has been, for a very long time, the primary response to human beings’ mortality (Becker 1997; Solomon et al. 2015). According to this approach, cultures and religions are hero systems for overcoming death anxiety. Becker described the “cultural hero-system” as “a mythical hero-system in which people serve in order to earn a feeling of primary value, of cosmic specialness, of ultimate usefulness to creation, of unshakable meaning” (Becker 1997, p. 5). Closed societies supported by static religion give people psychological security by providing black and white patterns of us versus them.

The specific combination of altruism toward one’s group members and a clear distance from other groups that characterizes all closed societies corresponds with Samuel Bowlles’s research on “parochial altruism” (Bowles 2008; Bowles and Gintis 2011, pp. 133–47; cf. Palaver 2015). According to Bowles, parochial altruism is a pattern of social behavior that has lasted from the early days of human civilization until our own times:
In ancestral humans, evolutionary pressures favored cooperative institutions among group members as well as conflict with other groups. These were complemented by individual dispositions of solidarity and generosity toward one’s own, and suspicion and hostility toward others. This potent combination of group and individual attributes is as characteristic of the contemporary welfare state in a system of heavily armed and competing nations—in short, modern nationalism—as it was among our ancestors. (Bowles 2008, p. 327)

Girard’s mimetic theory helps to understand how closed societies and static religion jointly emerged at the dawn of human civilization. According to Girard’s understanding of the sacred, early tribal groups overcame their internal rivalries by killing or expelling one of their members as a scapegoat for causing the crisis that threatened the group (Girard 1977). An unconscious and double transference turned the scapegoat not only into a dangerous troublemaker but also into a divine hero because of the peace he provided to the group through his expulsion. Conscious ritual repetitions of this foundational mechanism gave these early groups peace and stability. The ritual repetition explains how the outside takes over the demonic side of the expelled scapegoat. Asked about Eibl-Eibesfeldt’s description of pseudospeciation, Girard explained that the “inside-outside relationship lies at the heart of the scapegoat mechanism” and that the expulsion of the scapegoat turns the “outside” into “a place of unrestrained violence. In many archaic societies there are no human beings outside the tribe: they represent themselves as the only humans.” (Girard 2008, p. 115; cf. Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1972, pp. 99–100)

The combination of closed societies and static religion developed a pattern of sociability that helped to stabilize tribal communities and provide psychological security to its members. This pattern is not only typical of primordial small tribes but also applies to much larger societies. It is at the core of modern nationalism and explains why populist movements can also benefit from it. Times of crisis make it especially attractive.

4. Dynamic Religion as a Way toward Fraternity and Democracy

Are we therefore doomed to parochial altruism and closed societies that only recede during prosperous and sunny periods of history, always lurking in the underground to return immediately as soon as darker times occur? The answer to this question is negative. Most of the thinkers mentioned so far do not think that closed societies are inevitable. Camus’s novel expresses in the words of Tarrou—the second figure in The Plague who shares views of the author—that human beings are able to support others out of genuine love if you “give them the opportunity” (Camus 2002, p. 115). Arendt mentioned “promises” that set up “islands of security” in the “ocean of uncertainty” (Arendt 1998, pp. 237, 244). For Girard, mimetic desire does not automatically lead to rivalry and violence that necessitate closed societies, but he claims in the very same book in which he called conflicts “normal” that “mimetic desire is intrinsically good” (Girard 2001, p. 15). Eibl-Eibesfeldt recommended “education for tolerance [. . .] to eliminate the element of hostility from man’s habit of fencing himself off” (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1972, p. 40). Samuel Bowles concludes his article by stating, “even if I am right that a parochial form of altruism is part of the human legacy, it need not be our fate” (Bowles 2008, p. 327). Some of these thinkers refer directly or indirectly to religion as a way out of the impasse of parochial altruism. Arendt’s reflections on the promise start with the example of Abraham who “departed from his country for no other reason than to try out the power of mutual promise in the wilderness of the world, until eventually God himself agreed to make a Covenant with him” (Arendt 1998, pp. 243–44). Bowles mentions “the intellectual, political, and even military collaboration of Muslims, Christians, and Jews that occurred in parts of Islamic Spain” to show that “ethnic hostility can be redirected, attenuated, and even eliminated in a matter of decades or years” (Bowles 2008, p. 327). Comparing Hitler with Gandhi, concerning pseudospeciation, led Erikson to the conclusion that it was the latter’s religious orientation that helped him to stand for an inclusive identity:

The difference between a Hitler and a Gandhi is [. . .] that Hitler’s violent methods were tied to a totalistic reinforcement of a pseudospecies (the German race), the fiction of which
Religiosity could only be maintained by vilifying and annihilating another pseudo-subspecies, the Jews. Gandhi’s nonviolent technique, on the contrary, was not only tied to the political realities of his day, but also revived the more inclusive identity promised in the world religions. (Evans and Erikson 1967, p. 71)

In Erikson’s book on Gandhi, he stresses even more explicitly that a genuine religiosity overcomes pseudospeciation:

Religiosity is the consciousness of death, the love of all men as equally mortal, and the charitable insight that men hate other men “mortally” in the hope of gaining a sense of immortality out of the vaingloriousness of their own pseudospecies. (Erikson 1993, p. 194)

The German Egyptologist Jan Assmann, too, sees religion in the realm of culture as “a principle counteracting the effects of ‘pseudo-speciation’” (Assmann 2008, p. 141). He recognizes religion as “a promotor of intercultural translatable” during three millennia B.C.E. (Assmann 2008, p. 140). Comparing Erikson with Assmann shows, however, that the latter does not mention religion as a force to love all of humanity, but its translations remain inside an imperial frame. According to Bergson, imperialism definitely does not reach beyond closed societies (Bergson 1977, pp. 310–11). Its size and expansion do not change its fundamental closure.

Looking at religion concerning pseudospeciation or parochial altruism raises an important question. If static religion is an essential component of closed societies, how can religion provide a way out of parochialism? Bergson’s theory of religion helps us to respond to this question because he distinguishes in his seminal work The Two Sources of Morality and Religion from 1932 between two fundamentally different types of religion that correspond to two different types of moralities and two different types of societies. He distinguished dynamic religion, which enables the open society, from the static religion that accompanies closed societies. A closed society relies on the social pressure of “pure obligation”, whereas an “absolute morality” characterizes the open society (Bergson 1977, pp. 33–34). “Exceptional men” like “the sages of Greece, the prophets of Israel, the Arahants of Buddhism” or the “Christian saints” have incarnated this morality (Bergson 1977, p. 34). In these human beings, a creative élan has entered our world that Bergson identified with God and that enables us to love all of humanity and the whole of nature and not just one’s tribe, one’s family, or one’s nation, even if it is a huge empire.

Religion expresses this truth in its own way by saying that it is in God that we love all other men. And all great mystics declare that they have the impression of a current passing from their soul to God, and flowing back again from God to mankind. (Bergson 1977, p. 53; cf. Kolakowski 2001, pp. 73–78)

According to Bergson, the dynamic religion culminates in Christ’s Sermon on the Mount and his call to love our enemies (Matthew 5: 47–45). Bergson is right to emphasize the overcoming of closure in key passages of the Gospels. Girard’s mimetic theory confirms Bergson’s distinction between static and dynamic religion. Early on, Girard distinguished in his work between “the religion that comes from man” and “the religion that comes from God” (Girard 1987, p. 166). The first type of religion is “a more or less violent disavowal of human violence”, which he identified with the sacred. The second type is given by the non-violent God and can be identified with the holy. Girard’s last book, Battling to the End, finally provides a consistent and systematic distinction between the sacred and the holy. He expresses it most clearly in his rejection of fundamentalist longings for God’s violent interventions:

The apocalypse has to be taken out of fundamentalist hands. [. . . ] Human violence produces the sacred, but holiness leads to the “other shore” that Christians, like Jews, vehemently believe will never be stained by human madness. (Girard 2010, p. 48)
We have to broaden, however, Bergson’s and Girard’s perspective, who too strongly emphasize Christianity’s superiority by showing that it was the Axial revolution that marked the shift from static to dynamic religion (Taylor 2007, pp. 146–58; Bellah 2011). We can find at the core of the world religions a mysticism that comes close to Bergson’s description of dynamic religion.

The closed society is a first response to the challenge of human mortality by offering the immortality of a superior pseudospecies. This intolerant response to death has often resulted in violence and war. Bergson recognized a different response in dynamic religion, which is, according to Vladimir Jankelévitch, very close to the biblical hope for overcoming death (Jankelévitch 2015, pp. 206–9, 224–25). It is a trust in a living God who can even enable people to sacrifice their lives for others. Emmanuel Lévinas points in a similar direction:

In Two Sources of Morality and Religion, the duration that Creative Evolution considered as vital impulse becomes interhuman life. Duration becomes the fact that a man can appeal to the inferiority of the other man. Such is the role of the saint and the hero beyond that of matter, the same hero and saint who lead to an open religion in which death no longer has a meaning. (Lévinas 2000, pp. 55–56)

The active mystics or the saints appeal to other people to join and create a universal sister- and brotherhood that turns the social solidarity of closed societies into the open society (Bergson 1977, pp. 57–58, 78). This type of fraternity is neither instinctual nor an abstract philosophical idea but stems from the experience of those exceptional mystics who share God’s love for all human beings and his whole creation: “Through God, in the strength of God, he loves all mankind with a divine love.” (Bergson 1977, p. 233) According to Bergson, this type of fraternity has to sustain democracy because it reconciles liberty and equality, these “two hostile sisters”, and dispels their “oft-noted contradiction” (Bergson 1977, p. 282). Fraternity is the most important, but often neglected, principle of the famous tripartite motto stemming from the French Revolution. In Bergson’s eyes it is essential and, for this reason, he claims that “democracy is evangelical in essence and that its motive power is love” (Bergson 1977, p. 282).

Universal fraternity, as understood by Bergson, is necessary to prevent democracy succumbing to its populist temptations. Inside a state, it protects the rights of minorities against the dominating majority. Internationally it prevents nationalist closures and forces a country to respect the universal human rights. Dynamic religion is important for sustaining the fraternal spirit in our democratic societies. Churches and religious communities play an important role in this regard in civil society. The problem, however, is that the world religions are not just lively and convincing examples of dynamic religion. The older type of static religion still plays a role in religion and society. Bergson was aware that despite Jesus’s openness toward a universal religion, historical Christianity was often much closer to a static religion. The First World War provided Bergson with a very sobering example of what he called a “mixed religion” (Bergson 1977, p. 214). He observed that the

nations at war each declare that they have God on their side, the deity in question thus becoming the national god of paganism, whereas the God they imagine they are evoking is a God common to all mankind, the mere vision of Whom, could all men but attain it, would mean the immediate abolition of war. (Bergson 1977, p. 215)

Quite similarly, Erikson too spoke in the 1980s about the fact that sometimes also “the religions themselves turned into new and powerful pseudospecies” (Erikson 1985, p. 217).

Populist movements can draw on sentiments and attitudes that are close to static religion. Religions are an important counterweight against populism as soon as the spirit of dynamic religion governs the daily life of their communities. In the following, I will engage with three positive examples of religiously inspired fraternity from three different religious backgrounds. The first example follows Catholic engagements with Bergson’s emphasis on fraternity. My second example is the Muslim philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne, whose work shows Bergson’s influence and who studied the
work of Muhammad Iqbal, who is another Muslim Bergsonian. The concluding example is Mahatma Gandhi, whose fraternal spirit also helps to undermine populism.

5. Three Examples for Religious Support of Fraternity

One of the students of Bergson was the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain. Despite his difficulties with the ontology of his teacher, he followed his longing for a holiness strengthening fraternal love. In his seminal book *Integral Humanism* from 1936 he pleaded for a “new style of sanctity” (Maritain 2017, p. 229). The common task, according to Maritain, is the “realization of a fraternal community” and not the “medieval idea of God’s empire to be built on earth, and still less would it be the myth of Class or Race, Nation or State” (Maritain 2017, p. 280). Maritain was an important representative of a fraternal Catholic modernity which—compared to paternal Catholic modernity—did not dominate Catholic thinking in the 20th century but contributed enormously to the opening up of the Catholic church toward ideological pluralism, democracy, and human rights (Chappel 2018). Robert Schuman, one of the founding fathers of the European Union followed Bergson and Maritain by emphasizing Christian brotherhood to overcome hatred and to strengthen solidarity in Europe (Schuman 2010, pp. 32, 34, 104). Out of this fraternal attitude he understood the importance to “counter the narrow-mindedness of political nationalism, autarkic protectionism, and of cultural isolationism”, replacing them with the “notion of solidarity” and “accepting the interdependency of all” (Schuman 2010, p. 35). Pope Francis clearly also belongs to this fraternal type of Catholicism. His understanding of religion resists populist instrumentalization (McCormick 2020a). He frequently mentions the importance of fraternity in his speeches and writings. In an interview with the German weekly, *Die Zeit*, he underlined the fraternal beginnings of the European Union that were not shaped by populism:

When the great politicians of the postwar period, such as Schuman or Adenauer, dreamed of the unity of Europe, they were not preoccupied with anything populist, but with the fraternalizing of Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals. (Franziskus and di Lorenzo 2017, p. 15)

In February 2019 Pope Francis signed, together with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, *A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* (Francis and Al-Tayyeb 2019). This was an important initiative by two leaders of world religions to strengthen universal fraternity in a world where populists try to stoke up tensions between religions.

My second example is Souleymane Bachir Diagne, a Senegalese philosopher and Muslim, whose works show his engagement with Bergson’s philosophy. In an article on the future of religion in the 21st century, he criticized Samuel Huntington’s clash of civilization with his static understanding of religion. Contrary to that, he favors a dynamic spirituality that enables dialog and overcomes religious and cultural conflicts. Whereas Huntington understands “identity” as “essentially religious and that it is in the nature of religion to secrete this petrifaction that inescapably leads groups to oppose forms of identification”, Diagne discovers a “‘decentring’ principle”, a “fluidity” as the “spiritual dimension” of religion (Diagne 2004, p. 101). According to Diagne, all world religions know the dynamic spirituality that may help us to break out of the dead ends of pseudospeciation and parochial altruism. He also emphasizes that religions must overcome their own tendencies to fundamentalist stagnation. “Self-scrutiny” and “critical self-reflection” are, according to Diagne, “a condition of the open society” (Diagne 2004, p. 102). Concerning Islam, he refers to Muhammad Iqbal, a Muslim poet and philosopher, who was also the spiritual father of Pakistan. Iqbal studied Bergson’s philosophy and used key insights of the French philosopher to reconstruct religious thought in Islam (Iqbal 2013; cf. Diagne 2011; Diagne 2020). We find in Iqbal’s writings the spirit of fraternity. Although he was engaged in the creation of a Muslim nation that became Pakistan ten years after his death, he understood that fraternity is more important than nationhood. In one of his poems he wrote

Appear, O Rider of Destiny!
Appear, O light of the dark realm of Change!
Silence the noise of the nations.
Imparadise our ears with thy music!
Arise and tune the harp of brotherhood (quoted in: (Diagne 2008, p. 126))

In his reconstruction of Islam he hoped for a “global spiritual democracy at the center of Islamic practice and belief” that goes far beyond nationalism or imperialism (Schewel 2017, p. 48; cf. Diagne 2020, pp. 57–68). Referring to Surah 49:13 he maintains that “Islam is neither Nationalism nor Imperialism but a League of Nations which recognizes artificial boundaries and racial distinctions for facility of reference only, and not for restricting the social horizon of its members.” (Iqbal 2013, p. 126). Islamic prayer expresses “social equality” and the “essential unity of all mankind” (Iqbal 2013, p. 75):

The Islamic form of association in prayer, therefore, besides its cognitive value, is further indicative of the aspiration to realize this essential unity of mankind as a fact in life by demolishing all barriers which stand between man and man.

Mahatma Gandhi, my third and final example, did not belong, as a Hindu, to the realm of Abrahamic religions, but he also emphasized the importance of universal fraternity. It is easy to prove this commitment because one book that collects some of his major insights carries the title All Men Are Brothers (Gandhi 1953). He frequently stressed the need for universal fraternity, and it was deeply rooted in his own spirituality. One example can be drawn from his frequent reflections on the first verse of the Isha Upanishad, his favorite mantra, in which he recognized a summary of the Bhagavad Gita and the truth that can be found in all religions: “All this, whatsoever moves on earth, is to be hidden in the Lord (the Self). When thou hast surrendered all this, then thou mayest enjoy. Do not covet the wealth of any man!” (Müller 1962, p. 311) In one of his reflections on this verse, he remarked that it expresses a universal fraternity: “I feel that everything good in all the scriptures is derived from this mantra. If it is universal brotherhood—not only brotherhood of all human beings, but of all living beings—I find it in this mantra.” (Gandhi 1976, p. 290)

Close to Bergson’s distinction between static and dynamic religion, Gandhi also distinguished between institutionalized religions and a type of religion expressed by terms like religiosity, spirituality, or piousness:

Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion, which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one’s very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies. (Gandhi 1965, p. 406)

Institutionalized religions are, of course, more likely to become static and, therefore, politically exploited as an identity marker. Gandhi wanted to overcome closures that easily lead to communalism, the Indian version of religiously defined groups that often emphasize their antagonistic differences by emphasizing belonging and not believing. Gandhi understood—again close to Bergson—that fraternity is an essential basis for every democracy. In a recent article on how Gandhi’s understanding of democracy can undermine populism, Cristiano Gianolla summarizes his approach, reminding us of Bergson:

Gandhi proposed a moral root for democracy that could re-establish the link between liberty and equality through fraternity, a category that Skaria [ . . . ] names “neighbourliness”. This resonates with the Gospel and with the ideal of fraternity furthered by the French Revolution, although this has lost significance in Western democratic discourse, compared to the other terms of liberty and equality. It is a central idea for the construction of citizenship [ . . . ], which to Gandhi, was paramount in building India in terms that contested discrimination, respected minorities, and put forward participation. (Gianolla 2020, p. 33; cf. Skaria 2002; Gupta 2017)
Gandhi supported a subsidiary understanding of democracy, which started from neighborliness in the small village and overcame all parochialism by finally reaching out to the whole world:

Every village will be a republic or *panchayat* having full powers. [ . . . ] In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, never-ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose centre will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units. (Gandhi 1982a, pp. 32–33)

He undermined the populist use of religion “through a spiritual understanding of democracy, with a moral-discursive justification in truth as God, which is at odds with theocratie or religious fundamentalism” (Gianolla 2020, pp. 35–36). India’s democracy was deeply shaped by his insight into the necessary connection between a fraternal democracy and nonviolence (Gupta 2013, pp. 46–67). Today, unfortunately, violent communalism is on the rise in India, and his approach is desperately needed. A first failure was the partition of India and Pakistan at the end of his life. On this question, Gandhi and Iqbal were adversaries, because Iqbal favored a two-state-solution. Both, however, shared the belief that religion should never be a separating force but a bridge between different religious, cultural, or political entities. When, shortly before the separation between India and Pakistan, violent tensions between Hindus and Muslims rose, Gandhi frequently reminded people of a verse in one of Iqbal’s songs: “religion does not teach us to bear ill will towards one another”, adding to it that “it is easy enough to be friendly to one’s friends, but to befriend the one who regards himself as your enemy is true religion.” (Gandhi 1982b, pp. 380–81) Gandhi’s words remind us of Bergson’s emphasis on the love for enemies in the Sermon on the Mount. Its fraternal spirit is essential for every democracy and an important antidote against its populist temptations.

6. Conclusions

Looking at our world of today, we can observe, at the same time, populist alignments with religion on the one hand and religious critic of populist hijacking of religion on the other. Does that reflect “the ambivalence of the sacred” in modern politics, as William McCormick claims in his excellent article on Pope Francis’s resistance to all exclusionary types of populism by invoking the famous book of Scott Appleby (McCormick 2020a, p. 19; Appleby 2000)? I am not recommending this concept for understanding the relationship between religion and populism, because it ultimately turns religion into something obscure that cannot be explained rationally. From an anthropological point of view, Henri Bergson’s distinction between static and dynamic religion is a more appropriate approach by showing how at the beginning of human civilization a type of religion emerged that was exclusionary and supported the development of closed societies. Especially in times of crisis people have tended to prefer social closure. Closed societies are, however, not the fate of humanity. Bergson observed that extraordinary people experienced a view of the world that transcended all closures and enabled the development of an open society. Mystics and saints lived a dynamic religion that allowed them to develop a perspective of universal fraternity. Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount with its call to love our enemies is, according to Bergson, the summit of dynamic religion.

A fraternal Catholic modernity reaching from Bergson over Jacques Maritain to Robert Schuman or to Pope Francis exemplifies how dynamic religion has unfolded inside the Catholic church. By going beyond Bergson, I have shown that we can also find convincing examples of dynamic religion, with its emphasis on fraternity, outside Christianity. I refer, for instance, to Muhammad Iqbal or Souleymane Bachir Diagne with their Muslim backgrounds or to the Hindu Mahatma Gandhi.

Populism, with its tendency to exclude people from its emphasized “we”, is closer to static than to dynamic religion. Because all religions remain to a certain degree “mixed religions”, it depends on the prevalence of static or dynamic religion inside religious communities as to how easily populists can
find religious collaborators. Examples of a growing distance between populists and religious leaders may be a sign of a turn toward dynamic religion, which will hopefully strengthen fraternity in our societies. Democracy is desperately in need of a fraternal spirit in society to keep populist tendencies in check.

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