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## Palingenetic Ultra-Nationalist Christianity: History, Identity, and the Falsity of Peripeteic Dialectics

The recent upsurge of European nationalism is partially an attempt to address the ongoing identity crisis that began with the Bourgeois revolution, which expressed itself through positivistic scientism and aggressive secularization, and culminated in the post-World War II “liberal consensus”: representative democracy and free-market capitalism as the “end of history.” Due to the needs of capitalism after World War II, coupled with the liberalization and Americanization of European societies, there has been a growing presence of “non-identical” elements within Europe, which itself is reexamining the very geography of what it means to be European. In this essay, I explore the historical context of the current identity struggles that are facing Europeans. From a Critical Theory perspective, I challenge the idea that Christianity or a Christian age can be resurrected by ultra-nationalists in their attempt to combat the cosmopolitanism of Western modernity. Moreover, I demonstrate how such attempts to return to an *idealized* Christian identity are rooted in a false possibility: Peripeteic Dialectics, or “dialectics in reverse.”

Keywords: *Volksgemeinschaft*, *Willensgemeinschaft*, Christianity, Peripeteic-Dialectics, islamization, dialects of history, nationalism, immigration

## Introduction: Identity Crisis

In recent years, there has been an upsurge in European nationalism attempting to address numerous political, economic, and most importantly, cultural issues, that are predominately affecting Western and Central Europe. The question of what it means to be European in the contemporary world defined by globalism, pluralism, and post-nation-state democracies has been the topic of discourse in dozens of conferences, political debates, and political party platforms. Beyond the broad question of Occidentalism, political discourses in individual European states have subjected their own particular identities to such scrutiny: “What does it mean to be German, to be Italian, to be Greek, to be Dutch, or to be French?” etc. Are these ethnic signifiers meaningful anymore now that citizenship is merely a legal matter? In other words, is being “European” only an issue of legality, i.e., politics, national will, and democratic deliberations, or is it still ontologically married to pre-political foundations: ethnicity, language, shared history, cultural traditions, and religious identity? Do these neglected “accidentals” comprise the actual “substance” of what it is to be European, or is modern *Europeanness* irretrievably beyond such particularities?

Behind these discourses is a foreboding sense that the pre-political particularities of individual cultures, their ethnos, language, shared history, cultural traditions, and religiosity, etc., which once formed the basis of their collective identity, are being replaced by *Völkerchaos* (chaos of peoples) caused by liberal immigration policies, overly beneficent refugee policies, and the ideology of diversity. This *Überfremdung* (over-foreignization), as the opponents of such immigration and refugee policies identify it, has undermined the basis of the European nations’ collective identities; it has severed the organic “nation” from the state, and it has introduced cultures, religions, and values/principles that are perceived as being irreconcilable with the democratic norms and libertine cultures of European societies. Such nationalist critics of liberal-democracy and neoliberal capitalism argue that the “good intentions” of the post-World War II states have destroyed the historical identity of Europe. As such, Europe has been “Americanized”; it has become an unnatural amalgamation of discordant voices vying for self-interested recognition within a secular culture that privileges no particular traditional culture above another, thus leaving the majority population, which is still bound to the pre-political foundations, to watch as their societies rapidly become something that no longer reflects the ethnic identity of the nation’s past (Vogel 2021).

It is the purpose of this article to critically examine the religious aspect of the attempt to reintroduce traditional identities back into European polity and culture through what I call “palingenetic ultra-nationalist Christianity,” which relies on the reversal of the dialectic of history, what I described as “peripeteic dialectics.” I will demonstrate that palingenetic ultra-nationalist Christianity, although a powerful force among nationalists is not a return to a pre-modern Europe, precisely because peripeteic dialectics itself is false; it is wholly incapable of de-negating that which has been negated through the dialectic of history. As such, the retreat into an idealized Christianity as a form of anti-modernist identity reclamation may be effective rhetoric in the *Kulturkampf* that is currently afoot in Europe, but as a civilizational project, it is bound to fail.

Before we can explore this phenomenon further, we must first examine how religion itself played a part in the disintegration of Europe’s pre-modern identity, whereupon it produced the conditions for Christianity’s politicization and nationalization in the current post-secular society.

## Historical Identity Fissures

Europe’s modern identity crisis did not begin in the 20<sup>th</sup> or the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It began long before that, with Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, King Henry VIII, and the other Protestant Reformers who broke the Catholic Church’s grip on medieval European civilization, therefore fracturing the dominant element that bound it together. Albeit limited, the Protestant Reformers democratized identity within a civilization that had been nearly uniformly determined by the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> After the Protestant Reformation took hold, once faithful Catholics could, by their own will, choose a different religious affiliation other than the one they were born into, or even create their own self-fulfilling religiosity outside of the norms of an established tradition. Although the friend/enemy dialectic between *Christendom* and the *dār al-Islam* (abode of Islam) continued to reinforce Europe as a distinctly “Christian” civilization, inside of itself, the singular architecture of its overall Catholic identity was continuing to crumble due to the alternative forms of Christianity created by Protestantism as well as Protestant-

1 The major exception to this is the Catholic/Orthodox schism, which was all but complete around the turn of the first millennium.

-inspired forms of political/ethnic nationalism that began to instill “national consciousness” into the various European nations.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, the world-historical event that privileged will over fate, reason over revelation, and eventually secularity over both religiosity and religious rule, increased the freedom of the individual will to self-create an identity beyond the given. Consequently, the individual was shackled even less to tradition as will, reason, and secular/scientific thought delivered to him intellectual horizons that were previously unavailable or even punishable by Church authorities. Through the Enlightenment’s critique of religious worldviews, both Catholic and Protestant, it created a geography for the individual to individualize, far beyond what was thinkable in prior ages. Nevertheless, the ability to self-create an identity through the freedom of the will remained the privilege of the few, who could, due to their social domination, exempt themselves from the overall cultural denominators, including religion, that still determined much of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) of the masses. However, at least until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was those same cultural, political, and intellectual elites that drove the defining moments of history that laid the intellectual foundations for the form of political freedom associated with the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The Bourgeois Enlightenment developed and disseminated the ideals that drove the Bourgeois revolutions in France and America. Having shed their religious veneer, visions of a society born out of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité* fueled the masses’ attempts to achieve self-governance, creating a space wherein they could think freely, act freely, and live freely: where they could engage in self-determination. As Horkheimer and Adorno wrote in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002).

Those same universalistic Enlightenment values meant to “liberate human beings” fueled their own “inner-critique” via Karl Marx and Marxism. Born out of the dialectic between reality and ideology, those dissatisfied with Bourgeois society fought against the painful truth that the Bourgeoisie failed to substantively achieve the very *liberté, égalité, fraternité* it promised to all. Thus, the philosophical principles that served as the basis of the bourgeois revolutions were taken seriously by the victims of bourgeois society and were radicalized via their marriage to class consciousness. Such radicalized secular principles were pressed into the service of the substantive freedom of all. Like Marx, those influenced by such radical polity recognized that traditional religious institu-

tions, although mere shadows of what they used to be in the Medieval age still served as a legitimating force for the hierarchical status quo in Bourgeois society, just as it did under feudalism. Thus, despite bourgeois secularity, institutional religion continued to provide the sanctification for the freedom of the few over the freedom of the many. For Marx and his followers, religion, especially all forms of Christianity, had to be *abstractly negated*—left in the dustbin of history—for it was both irrational and counterrevolutionary, and thus an impediment to man’s self-actualization and the realization of his political freedom (Marx 1978, 53–55). Unlike the Bourgeoisie, who only attempted to contain (or manipulate) religion by pushing it into civil society, the Marxists fought to thoroughly secularize their societies (Faroese 2008, 22–39). Nevertheless, how the Bourgeoisie’s hypocritical critique of religion and Marxism’s direct attack on religion affected religious identity was not a concern for either form of revolutionaries. As we will see, such a concern would inevitably return as a major factor in the “identity politics” in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

## National Identities and the Democratic Demos

Today, liberal democracies, informed by science, positivism, instrumental reason, and the ever-lingering suspicion of religion and its motivations, have effectively severed religion from the state. Although the Soviet Union attempted to wipe itself clean of religion, the capitalist countries, following the Bourgeois model of religious containment and/or marginalization, remained populated by religious believers, albeit to varying degrees in various states (Habermas 2009, 62–66). Although all secular states inoculate themselves against direct influence of religious institutions, the family, the very basis of Hegel’s tripartite conception of society, remained engrossed in religion and therefore continued to have a direct influence in the identity-formation in large portions of the democratic states’ citizenry. So too was civil society influenced by the continual existence of religion and religious institutions. Today, “post-secularity,” as Jürgen Habermas describes the condition of modern democratic societies, is a condition wherein states are wholly secular in their polity but are still informed by religious members of their population, making religion a factor that cannot be ignored in democratic discourse and deliberations (ibid).

What becomes of this condition is thus: on the one hand, secular democratic societies, still rooted in “universal” Enlightenment ideals,

The intentional democratic community takes the place of the ethnic complex.” Beginning with the French Revolution and later adopted by most Western states in some form, the meaning of the term “nation” was transformed from being defined by the individual’s biological and/or historical embodiment of pre-political foundations to one defined by politically derived notions of “citizenship.” In the latter form of community, citizens actualize their citizenship through the exercise of their rights via participation in democratic discourse, deliberations, and other constitutive activities.

open themselves up to the possibility of creating a new kind of community, the republican *Willensgemeinschaft* (willed community), wherein the “demos” is no longer determined by the traditional “ethnos,” as it was in the nationalist *volksgemeinschaft* (community of descent) that comprised the basis of the ethnos-bound “nation-states” (Habermas 1996, 494–495). As Jürgen Habermas argues, in the modern period, “each nation is now supposed to be granted the right to political self-determination. The intentional democratic community takes the place of the ethnic complex” (ibid., 494). Beginning with the French Revolution and later adopted by most Western states in some form, the meaning of the term “nation” was transformed from being defined by the individual’s *biological* and/or *historical* embodiment of pre-political foundations to one defined by *politically* derived notions of “citizenship.” In the latter form of community, citizens actualize their citizenship through the exercise of their rights via participation in democratic discourse, deliberations, and other constitutive activities (ibid., 495). In doing so, the *willed* community is created based on constitutional ideals, not an ethnic complex. Through the conscious appropriation of such constitutional ideals, an individual becomes an equal and full citizen in a nation wherein they may lack the full array of that nation’s historical ethnos.

This modern *willed* form of “nation” is devoid of traditional religious oaths and religious membership requirements; it is also devoid of ethnic determinations and constraints, uniform linguistic requirements, and the necessity of shared history. As such, the modern democratic “nation” is comprised of whom the demos *willed* to be “naturalized” into their nation. As Habermas reminds us, “in the melting pot of national consciousness, the ascriptive features of one’s origin were transformed into just so many results of a conscious appropriation of tradition. *Ascribed nationality gave way to an achieved nationalism, that is, to a conscious product of one’s own efforts*” (Habermas 1996, 495).<sup>2</sup>

While this approach to “nation” building was revolutionary, as it was rooted in the universalism of Enlightenment ideals, like all world-historical transformations, it was dialectical in nature. Along with its benevolent side, it also had a malevolent side that cast its shadow on the future of Europe: European “nations” became nations of non-Europeans, living in the uncertainties endemic to the post-secular condition, which many experienced as *Völkerchaos*.

2 Emphasis added.

In many ways, the notion of a “willed community” remained either too abstract, too utopian, or simply too destructive. For various groups, it attempted to negate that which shouldn’t be negated: traditional identity. Additionally, the formal notion of the political “citizen” buttressed against the material reality of the still-existing ethnic identity, which was never wholly negated by the political adoption of the ideology of the *willensgemeinschaft*, especially not in the countryside, wherein traditional identity markers remain staunchly apparent. In reality, the cosmopolitan notion of the “willed community” was a political construct that rarely transformed the lifeworld of the common citizen, as it was a theoretical change imposed upon the members of the ethnos by their urban intellectual elites. While those elites found methods by which they could relinquish their own ethnic identities in favor of an ascribed citizenship, the masses overwhelmingly remained unaffected, or when affected, began to show hostility towards their new ethnically divorced national identity. For many, an ascribed identity was experienced as a colonized identity—a forced assimilation with other ethnic groups in an attempt to create a new synthetic—and seemingly false—identity, one that seemed only to appeal to the urban elites.

Due to the persistence of pre-political foundations as the source of national identity, ethnicity continued to be a primary source for identity formation in the post-Enlightenment West, a problem that would continue to plague those nations that attempted to realign their national identities on Enlightenment universalism. Indeed, the antagonism between “traditional identity” and the emergence of modern cosmopolitan forms of identity fueled the rise of European nationalism, fascism, modern anti-Semitism, which eventually led to World War II and the Shoah.

### Crisis of the Non-Identical

Post-World War II, much of Europe had to be rebuilt. In an outburst of pathological and nationalistic Thanatos, it had all but destroyed itself. Nevertheless, with help of the United States’ Marshall Plan, Western and parts of Central Europe would rebuild their societies in such ways that would affirm the reality that Hegel had already predicted in the 19th century: Europe was no longer at the forefront of history—it had become an exhausted civilization (Siebert 2020). Like so many empires that came before the European empires, Europe as a civilization had moved into retirement as the leadership of the world-historical process

moved on to the Slavic world and the United States (ibid). However, in order to rebuild the now-retired Europe, labor would have to be procured, and for that, many of the European states looked to their colonies and former colonies, as well as to other nations that possessed surplus humanity that were willing to *temporarily* relocate.

Many of those who emigrated to Europe to help rebuild the metropolises believed they were as much a part of their “parent-country” as those who were the sons and daughters of the metropolises’ historical ethnic complex.<sup>3</sup> The sons and daughters of the colonies spoke the metropolises’ language; they studied the metropolises’ histories; they fought in the metropole’s wars, etc. They too were French, Dutch, Belgian, Italian, British, or so they believed. As they would learn, it took more than their colonial sacrifices for the benefit of the metropolises to *be of* the metropolises. They were, and remained, in fact, *non-identical*—something “other” than the “authentic” European, and therefore subject to different treatment than the native European.

With the influx of Muslims from Turkey, Lebanon, Morocco, India, and Pakistan, as well as numerous other Muslim countries, Europe experienced religious plurality for the first time since the early Middle Ages (Habermas 2009, 64–66). They were accustomed to the presence of Jews, but their presence remained marginalized, contained, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century all but eliminated. Now, with the procurement of labor in the Muslim world and former colonies, the great “threat” to Christendom, Islam, was inside the Christendom’s old house. Europe’s *intra-faith schisms* between Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestant denominations were now compounded by the problem of *inter-faith plurality* (ibid). However, beginning in the 1960s, the demand to extend citizenship to the Islamic “temporary laborers,” who in the meantime had settled in, raised families, educated their children, and buried their dead in European soil, began to take hold. The Republican idea of a *willensgemeinschaft*, which wasn’t as threatening to the integrity of European identity when Europe was still at the forefront of history, and still relatively homogenous, would be tested. Could the European states, with all their own history-bound particularities, as well as their growing social secularism, embrace believers from a non-Christian faith, of various ethnicities, languages, and cultural norms? Could they make a modern *willens-*

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3 Not all immigrants to Europe were from the colonies of European empires. Some immigrated to the West via “guest worker” programs, such was the case in Germany. Nevertheless, a sense of belonging to their adoptive country did not take long to develop for many of the guest workers, as they later pressed their case to state in Europe as opposed to returning to their country of origin.



*gemeinschaft* nation out of the nations of the world? Or would those *uneigentlich* (inauthentic)—non-identical—“foreigners” remain perpetually anatopists: “those in the wrong place”? In words that echoed Heidegger’s philosophical anti-Semitism, the latter position assumed that *anatopists* lack the historical “enrootedness” that was necessary to be *eigentlich* (authentic Europeans) (Rockmore 2017, 161–166; Adorno 2003). Like the Jews before them, immigrants residing in Europe were often considered “worldless,” belonging neither to the nations they came from nor to Europe. For the political Left and most Liberals, the ideals of the Enlightenment demanded the “inclusion of the other” in the post-nationalist constitutional states (Habermas 1998, 105–127). For those leery of the “worldless” others, it mattered not if “paper citizenship” was extended to them; they would always remain rootless and inauthentic: *ethnic anatopists* who are rightly subject to nationalist “adiaphorization” (Bauman 2016, 35).<sup>4</sup> For Liberals and the Left, diversity was a positive; it concretely actualized the otherwise abstract and formal ideals of the Enlightenment. For the Right, diversity meant the collapse of authenticity.

This division within the identity of Europe between the traditional *ethnos* as the basis of the community—the *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil) community—and the modern *willed* political community, continued to fester under the surface of Europe’s assumed inclusivity, diversity, and tolerance. However, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century turned into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, historical catalysts began to agitate the subterranean cleavages once again within European societies, and the identity issues that plagued Europe in the 1930s and 1940s began to resurface in the public sphere.

## Muslim Immigrants, Refugees, and the Return to Ethno-Nationalism

While the growth of the Muslim community in Europe was a constant source of irritation for traditionalists, nationalists, and conservatives, especially in the *Willensgemeinschaft* states in Western and Central Europe, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the consequent refugee crisis would be a catalyst for the rise of new forms of right-wing identity politics, one that would once again involve religion.

<sup>4</sup> Zygmunt Bauman defines “adiaphorization” as the exemption of a class of people, and what is done to them, from the moral evaluation that is normatively applied to all others.

The world historical event of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, had already shaken Europe's confidence in the eventual secularization of the world when the Syrian refugee crisis began in 2011 (Habermas 2009, 63–64). As secularization and capitalist globalization continued to encroach upon traditionally religious societies, especially in the Muslim world, religion seemed to find a new vitality in opposition to Westernization and Western foreign policy (ibid). Wahhabi Islam, that which was associated with Usama bin Laden, al-Qa'eda and other terrorist groups, had a “belief attitude” that was militaristic, aggrieved, and fueled with the desire to exact revenge (*Lex Talionis*) upon the Western states, especially the United States, Britain, and France (Habermas, Derrida and Borradori 2003, 31–33). Within the already fragile context of post-9/11 Europe, wherein Muslims were viewed with suspicion, the massive influx of refugees from Syria, along with economic migrants from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other Muslim countries, fuel a nationalistic backlash. Many Europeans, not just the far-right, believed Europe was too accommodating to the outsiders, whose caravans-of-the-wretched appeared as “invasion forces.” Their weapons were no longer swords and cannons, but rather their wombs.

Ethno-nationalists in all European states, who already bemoaned the establishment of pluralistic nature of the *Willensgemeinschaften*, took the opportunity of the perceived *Völkerchaos* to heighten their nativist appeal. Identitarian groups politically maximized the demographic uneasiness caused by the sudden influx of others, driving up violent attacks on all those deemed non-identical and anatomic. Regardless of whether they were newly arrived or had been there for generations, their ethnic differences made them a target. Nationalists also took aim at establishment politicians and political parties. The German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, was especially targeted for her overly welcoming policies on refugees. With the Holocaust ever present in German collective memory, and the keen recognition of Germany's unique responsibility to care for the marginalized, in September of 2015, Merkel stated, “The fundamental right to asylum for the politically persecuted knows no upper limit; that also goes for refugees who come to us from the hell of a civil war” (Die Welt 2015). Nationalists retorted that all European peoples have a “fundamental right to difference,” i.e., each ethnos has the right to be a unique people; to be a people who are identical with their cultural inheritance within their own national space, and to enact measures that preserves their unique identities. Merkel's *Überfremdung* threatened to collapse the already fragile state of native European *ethno-*

*pluralism*, as it threatened to radically expand the “Americanization” of Europe.<sup>5</sup>

Nationalist intellectuals, including Alain de Benoist, Guillaume Faye, and Renaud Camus, as well as the Russian traditionalist, Alexander Dugin, coupled with the burgeoning nationalist political organizations such as PEGIDA in Germany, Lega Nord in Italy, Front National in France, and the Freedom Party in the Netherlands, etc., argued that these so-called “refugees” were an Islamic “Trojan Horse” in Europe. Like the Muslim immigrants before them, these refugees were a religiously aggressive invading army that (1) didn’t respect the cultural norms of Europe, (2) would fail to integrate and/or assimilate, and thus (3) would accelerate Europe’s identity collapse. As Europe’s identity fades, in its place would come “Islamization,” the process wherein post-secular European societies gradually normalize and adapt to Islamic norms, values, and traditions. Eventually, the former territories of Christendom would be absorbed within the broader *dār al-Islam*.<sup>6</sup> Muslims, the historical anti-identity of Christian Europe, were now seen as the physical “replacers” who came to “replace” Europeans in their own homelands (Camus 2018, 18–39). This “ethnic submersion,” as the French author Renaud Camus calls demographic change, was the inevitable outcome of Europe’s misguided immigration and refugee policies. Coupled with aggressive *Islamization* and *Africanization*, ethnic submersion was presented as the main threat to the liberal order of Europe.<sup>7</sup> The liberal *Willensgemeinschaften* were undermining their own existence with their own policies, many mandated by the European Union. The ultra-nationalists argued that without a strong identity, rooted in tradition, history, and language, that would act as a bulwark against the Islamization and

5 Associated with the *Nouvelle Droite* thinker Alain de Benoist, “ethnopluralism” is sometimes referred to as “ethno-differentialism.”

6 It would surprise many of today’s anti-Muslim fascists to find out that, according to Hitler’s friend, architect, and Minister of Armaments, Albert Speer, Adolf Hitler himself believed that it would have been better had Islam conquered the whole of Europe when it was first expanding out of Arabia in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century. Hitler believed Islam was an aggressive, expansionist, and therefore predatory religion, which was better suited for the Germanic people than Christianity, which privileged “meekness.” “Islamized Germans,” Hitler believed, would have eventually been the leaders of the expansive Muslim Empire, since they were racially superior to the Arabs (Speer 1970, 114–115).

7 This position was voiced by the Norwegian terrorist, Anders Behring Breivik, in his manifesto, *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*, which he released to the public via the internet on the same day that he massacred seventy-seven people, mostly teenagers, in Oslo and Utøya Island, Norway.

Africanization threat, Europe would remain inherently colonizable by the world's wretched. Thus, it was argued by some ultra-nationalist voices that a "return" to a distinct and uncompromising identity, rooted in Europe's own cultural resources, was necessary to construct if Europeans were to triumph over the on-going process of ethnic submersion (Reno 2019, 135–162).

### The Return to Christian Identity

Because the inherent universalism within the Enlightenment neutralizes the traditional, biological, and linguistic complex as a means of establishing a "nation," for nationalists, a march behind the "open society" of the Enlightenment had to occur. The ethnos that once determined membership in the demos had to be reestablished. Such a retrotopian move would bolster the particularities of European identity, thus foregoing a collapse into a discordant multiplicity of sub-nations pretending to be a singular nation.

An important element in the nationalists' attempts to repel Islamization is the attempt to "return" to a religious identity, one firmly rooted in the ethnic complex of the European past. While some, like French New Right theorist Alain de Benoist, argue for a reappropriation of pre-Christian European paganism, most religious identitarians focus on Christianity to reinvigorate a traditional European identity. It is assumed that the cultural particularities of European Christianity, which distinguish European civilization from Islamic civilization, would afford them a powerful identity-platform through which they could resist the Muslim "invasion."

However, Christianity, especially in its most Greco-Roman form, i.e., Catholicism, is not the form of Christianity that is most attuned to nationalist goals; it is saturated with universalism, being that it is the "universal church" that embodies a globalist spirit that is hated by nationalists. On the other hand, mainstream Protestantism, although historically attached to nationalist sentiments, produced the very conditions from which the Enlightened "open society" was born. Additionally,

8 In his book, *On Being Pagan*, Alain de Benoist argues that modern forms of totalitarianism stem from Christian roots. In order for Christian conceptions of universal equality to be valid, they must invalidate human diversity and difference. As such, a return to a European pagan worldview, which included the respect of difference, is more appropriate for those fight against the amalgamation and eventual homogenization of citizens within the liberal democratic states (Benoist 2018).

mainline Protestant churches are struggling under the weight of secularism to survive. Protestantism, as Max Horkheimer commented, had sacrificed the “opposing principle of Christianity” to bourgeois “reality,” which left Protestants all but indistinguishable from non-religious citizens (Horkheimer 1993, 211). In other words, modern Protestantism abandoned its “otherworldliness” in its accommodation to bourgeois society. Thus, it was drained of the very negativity towards the status quo that is needed by nationalists in their construction of a new “bulwark” religious identity. The Catholic Church is the Medieval Church, and the Medieval Church was the institution that bound Western and Central Europeans together, gave them a common identity, and repelled the Muslims. Protestantism fragmented that identity, and as a fragmented and compromised identity, it cannot serve as a vehicle for a *European-wide* nationalist religion; it can only serve as a localized resource within a particular nation’s struggle against multiculturalism, etc.

Despite Catholicism’s claim to universality, and its practice of inter-civilizational amalgamation, it remains the primary resource from which nationalists draw their religious material to construct their peculiar form of nationalist religion.<sup>9</sup> According to the Catholic identitarian Julien Langella (2020, 4–5),

[Catholicism] is what makes us “identical” in the sense that we are depositories of the same collective identity... To be Catholic then is not only a faith, but also an identity nourished by multiple influences and produced by history, for it is men with their language, their country of origin and their own walk of life who built Christian culture.

What is important here for Langella is not that Catholicism is a global religion, which regards all members of the human family as equally bearing the likeness of God, but rather that it produced in most of Europe an over-arching singular identity, one that respected the national differences between the European peoples but nevertheless made them all “identical” to a single source of identity. Being identical, they could distinguish themselves as a civilization against the “others,” especially the Muslims and Jews, as well as mobilize the European peninsula against the threat of the others if so needed, as it did in during the Crusades, Reconquista, and fight against the Ottoman Turks, etc. This resource had to be resurrected.

<sup>9</sup> The major exception to this is in England, wherein the Anglican Church, which retains much of its Catholicity, serves as the source of “religious” material for nationalists.

## Palingenetic Ultra-Nationalist Christianity

What nationalists create in the name of an imagined past-Christianity is what I call “palingenetic ultra-nationalist Christianity,” a form of religion that is fully politicized and without any concern for the many other facets of traditional religion. It is a form of religious fundamentalism without theology, without morality, without eschatology: it is merely politics with a religious veneer.

In its substance, what is “palingenetic ultra-nationalist Christianity”? First, the concept of “palingenetic ultra-nationalism” is adapted from Roger Griffin’s conception of fascism. For Griffin, fascism is “a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism” (Griffin 1993, 26). One of the key components that makes fascism powerful is that it promises an aggrieved population a convenient remedy from the horror and terror of the given condition. The descriptor “palingenetic,” comprised of the words *palin*—“again”—and *genesis*—“birth” (or creation)—invokes a sense of “renewal,” “resurrection,” or “rejuvenation,” a coming forth of the new from the ashes of the old (ibid., 32–36). It is a dialectical process wherein that which can be rescued and preserved from the old is made new again, and that which must be negated is left in the dustbin of history. Palingenetic myths attempt to explain the *cycles* of human and civilizational degeneration and regeneration, regression and progression, thus giving both an understanding of present decline and hope for a renewed future. Such cyclicity is imbedded in various spiritual and religious traditions. For example, it can be found in the Hindu myth of Kali Yuga, the Norse myth of Ragnarök, and Buddhist conceptions of *Samsara* (rebirth). Such cyclical concepts can be found in secular forms as well, such as William Strauss and Neil Howe’s concept of the “Fourth Turning,” the crisis theory of the Traditionalist René Guénon, the “Fourth Political Theory” of the Russian Traditionalist Alexander Dugin, the decadence/heroic cycles of the Italian über-fascist Julius Evola (Andersen 2018). Non-cyclical forms of palingenesis can be found in the Abrahamic traditions: the messianic time of Judaism, the resurrection of Christ as well as Christian Eschatology, and the Islamic tradition’s expectation of the Mahdi. In these latter forms, the time-continuum is linear: palingenesis ends the time-continuum, and as a result, there is no more “decline” from which a people or civilization would once again have to transcend. Either way, the time continuum, whether cyclical or linear, ends with the longed-for renewal, which includes the purification and thus rejuvenation of a lost identity.

Second in Griffin's definition is his concept of "ultra-nationalism." Especially in a populist form, ultra-nationalism is a "generic term for political forces which... depend on »people power« as the basis of their legitimacy [and] which »go beyond,« and hence reject, anything compatible with liberal institutions or with the tradition of the Enlightenment humanism which underpins them" (ibid., 36–37). Nationalism, as a political construct, is a retreat behind the cosmopolitan, multicultural, democratic state, and a return to defining the nation by the shared pre-political foundations that exist with an "organic" community: the community of *Blut und Boden*. That community alone comprises the "nation," and from their collective consent (or submission), the populist leader rules the nation-state.

When brought together, palingenetic ultra-nationalism is a political and cultural attempt to restore, renew, and reinvigorate the *Volksgemeinschaft* of ages past, replacing the *Willensgemeinschaft* with a radically defined ethnostate—one predicated upon and determined exclusively by the pre-political foundations of shared ethnicity, shared language, shared history, and shared tradition: that which one is "born" into and is the natural/historical inheritor of.<sup>10</sup>

Religion provides two mobilizing factors within the palingenetic ultra-nationalist project. First, it is a carrier of much of an ethnos' history, language, and other important signifiers of cultural identity. Second, it can be mobilized as a force for national unity, solidarity, and cohesion. Before we examine the first mobilizing factor, it is important to thoroughly understand the second.

The roots of the word "religion" can be found in the compounding of two Latin words: "re" (again) and "ligare" (to bind). As such, religion is an interpretation of reality and orientation of action that, at its root, *binds people together* within a *particular socio-cultural group*. It gives them a sense of belonging and a sense of who they are. In other words, religion is a force that transforms an aggregate of individuals into a singular group with a strong sense of identity based around dogmas and rituals. However, identity, as a psychological need, is dialectical in nature, especially when religiously politicized: those who are identical are those who

10 Here, Heidegger's ontological concept of *Geworfenheit* (thrownness) is essential, as it denotes the arbitrary way in which Dasein (the individual "being there") has been "thrown" into existence within a matrix of particularities: ethnos, time, geography, family, nation-state, etc., wherein Dasein finds their cultural, linguistic, and historical inheritance that will socialize (*Bildung*) them into a member of the volk. Those members that become that which they were born into will become authentic (*Eigentlich*).

Identities, especially religious identities, are often iron-clad; no one is permitted entry unless they have been born within the community—which is something that does not proceed from the will but rather from history—or is “naturalized” into the identity. As it is the case that religion constructs such iron barriers around its identical community, it inevitably produces the “other,” i.e., the positivity of belonging creates the negativity of non-belonging. Thus, by strengthening the religious identity of the ethnos, palingenetic ultra-nationalists attempt to radically cut off the possibility of the “other” from becoming naturalized within the community. The stronger the religious identity becomes, the more the non-identity of the “others” is solidified.

belong within the borders of the exclusive religious identity. Those who are non-identical remain outside of those borders. Identities, especially religious identities, are often iron-clad; no one is permitted entry unless they have been born within the community—which is something that does not proceed from the *will* but rather from *history*—or is “naturalized” into the identity.<sup>11</sup> As it is the case that religion constructs such iron barriers around its identical community, it inevitably produces the “other,” i.e., the *positivity* of belonging creates the *negativity* of non-belonging. Thus, by strengthening the religious identity of the ethnos, palingenetic ultra-nationalists attempt to radically cut off the possibility of the “other” from becoming naturalized within the community. The stronger the religious identity becomes, the more the non-identity of the “others” is solidified.

In regards to the second mobilizing factor of religion, being the carrier of much of an ethnos’ pre-modern history, cultural identity, linguistics, etc., if the religion and/or religious institutions that serve as the traditional/historical culture’s protectors are perceived to be under threat by outside forces, mobilization of the aggrieved ethnos against such threats is possible, for the identity of the ethnos itself remains tied to those cultural signifiers, even if the signifiers are no longer actively believed in. For example, just because the “tombs and monument of God,” as Nietzsche called the great basilicas of Europe, are no longer filled with believing Christians, it does not mean that the descendants of the once-believing Christians want to see those “tombs and monuments” transformed into mosques (Nietzsche 2008, 103–104). The identity of the basilicas as monuments to the Christian past of the now post-secular societies must be preserved, as preservation is seen as a means to assert the historical identity of the organic ethnos against the *Überfremdung* of the dysgenic present. Such “tombs and monuments” are concrete signifiers of the *historical* identity of the nation.

### Palingenetic Appearance

In Europe, Christian signifiers, predominantly its most prominent images (the crucifix, saints, basilicas, and churches, etc.), once appropriated by ultra-nationalists, invoke the mere *appearance* of a religious age, not

11 While what can be called “naturalization” occurred in pre-modern societies, naturalization as a political process wherein the traditionally non-identical become an equal part of another society is a modern post-Enlightenment phenomenon.



the *substance* of the religion itself. The palingenetic ultra-nationalist does not make a conversion to Christianity's theological dogmas, its moral-practical teachings, or its comprehensive worldview and eschatology. The substance of the faith has little importance in the struggle against the "otherness" of the "invaders." Rather, Christianity in the hands of the ultra-nationalists is hollowed of its vital essence, which is already crippled in secular society. Like Emperor Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when he reconciled the burgeoning Catholic Church with the Roman State, he drained Christianity of its *negativity*—its "otherworldliness," which served as the basis of its prophetic-negativity. Christianity no longer represented the "not-yet," the wholly other, the longing for the perfect justice and a reconciled world beyond the world of Golgotha (Byrd 2020, 116). Rather, it identified with and sanctioned the world-at-is with all the brutality, horror, and terror that was typical of the Roman Empire. Similarly, today, the cross is often paraded by ultra-nationalists alongside the flag of their secular nation, giving the impression that Christianity and the aggrieved ethnos are identical, as opposed to the cross representing an independent system of thought, interpretation of reality, and orientation of action that stands juxtaposed to the criminal history of any given individual, nation, or state. As an Abrahamic religion, and therefore of religion of prophetic critique, the inherent negativity of Christianity remains critical of the nation, its history, its current state, and its future goals. When preserving its negativity, it serves as the nation's grand inquisitor. This negativity of Christianity, its *essential interior*, is sacrificed by the ultra-nationalists, as they abandon the "otherworldliness" of the prophetic religion in their attempt to mobilize the *exterior identity* that religion produces, a form of "cultural Christianity" that is easily appropriated for nefarious purposes precisely because it has lost its ability to resist such functionalization. As a mere symbol, which no longer symbolizes its essential interior, Christianity's exterior identity can be enlisted into a nationalist struggle that in all cases would violate Christianity's own national-transcendent essential interior. Christianity's negativity, born out of the suffering of the slaughterbench of history, which would otherwise indict the ultra-nationalists, especially on the ground of creating a new idol, the *pure nation*, is discarded for a hollowed-out Christian aesthetics: the "whitened sepulcher" of Christo-nationalist identity politics, i.e., Christianity without Christianity.

This form of totally politicized religion has no legislative power over those who wield it; they do not subject themselves to its ethical demands. Its only power is what it signifies once it is thoroughly saturated with

identity politics, namely, a return to a state-of-being wherein the non-identical are threatened by the total annihilation by the prospect of a future pure ethnostate. As Adorno (1999, 362) states in his *Negative Dialectics*:

Genocide is the absolute integration. It is on its way wherever men are leveled off—“polished off,” as the German military called it—until one exterminates them literally, as deviations from the concept of their total nullity. Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death.

Christian signifiers are functionalized by the ultra-nationalists to instill fear in the “other.” At its core, palingenetic ultra-nationalist Christianity is not meant to convert the masses to an Abrahamic faith, but rather to remind them that Auschwitz can happen again.

#### Double Falsity of Peripeteic Dialectics

Despite its potency as a political threat, palingenetic ultra-nationalist Christianity is predicated on a false dialectic, one that becomes obvious as one examines the logical structure of their attempts to “renew” an identity that has already been determinately negated (*Aufheben*). An attempt to impel history into a false return of the *status quo ante* is an attempt to reverse the dialect of history—to engage in what I call “peripeteic dialectics,” or “dialectics in reverse.” This form of dialectical thought attempts to determinately negate that which has already been determinately negated in the historical process. In other words, from a Hegelian and Marxian perspective, as history progresses forward in a monotonic and orthogenetic fashion, that which is negated through the historical process is lost to us, as it remains bound to the particular time, place, circumstance, and other specificities of the era from which it existed.<sup>12</sup> From that perspective, one cannot return to the European Middle Ages precisely because the particularities of those ages have been

12 I use the terms “monotonic” and “orthogenetic” to denote the Hegelian/Marxist idea of an unchanging and progressive trajectory within the dialectic of history, that history does not reverse course and de-negate that which has already been negated. For nationalists, firmly affixed to the rightness of former times, such a “monotonic” and “orthogenetic” conception of history is appalling, for it implies that that which they value, the idealized past, cannot be retrieved and actualized in the future, thus barring them from the future they wish to realize. As such, the Hegelian/Marxist “monotonic” view of the dialectics of history is rejected by nationalists for peripeteic dialectics.

negated, not abstractly, but rather determinately. In other words, that which was generally beneficial, and therefore preserved within the dialectic of history, is still with us, even in the modern period. However, that which proved insufficient, unsubstantiated, outdated, and/or untrue, has been left behind in the ditch of history. Nevertheless, among nationalists, there is a longing to “return” to a time wherein that which has been negated determined the overall conditions of European society. This would involve the de-negation and eventual restitution of that which has already been negated through the orthogenetic historical process. Peripeteic dialectics promises those who nostalgically long for a previous age the ability to reconstruct the world that they long for, especially the determined – and thus “authentic” or “identical”—identity it once produced. Such peripeteic dialectics promises that *regression* from the dysgenic contemporary is in reality *progression*. Thus, in the nationalists’ opinion, setting history in reverse is preferable to continuing the monotonic dialectic of history that they believe is destroying what’s left of Europe’s organic identity. The “orthogenetic” assumption of Hegelian and Marxian dialectics is thus rejected by the nationalists, who see anything but “progress” in the forward moving history of Europe. To save European civilization, the actualization of the retrotopian ethnostate means the cancellation of the monotonic and orthogenetic dialectic of history in favor of a peripeteic dialectical “return.”

Despite the overwhelming desire of palingenetic ultra-nationalist Christians to escape from the dysgenic present, their peripeteic dialectical politics embodies a double falsity. The first element is based in a *delusion* and the second element is based in a *lie*.

First, peripeteic dialectics fails to return contemporary society to a past age in the totality of its particularities; the present age cannot recover the spirit—the essence—of a former age. Such a spirit is determined precisely by the sum of particularities of that former age, not merely through the continual existence of an ethnos. The ethnos and the age interpenetrate each other and co-determine the constitutional being of each other. As history moves, the ever-renewing ethnos continues its evolution with the changing spirit of the age, specifically through the process of determinate negation. Even if the historical ethnos still exists in the present moment, the phase of history from which it passed cannot be reconstructed and/or resurrected; it remains a phantom—somehow present but unattainable. Attempts to recapture the past merely produces “imagined” ages, which are wholly dependent on the present from which they proceed, thus making the imagined past a mere *reflection* of the present because it is based in the assumed *needs*

of the present. The organicity of such a past age has already been lost to the time continuum, thus making all “imagined” visions of such an age false. As such, peripeteic dialectics inevitably ends in a failed anachronism: the false appropriation of entities, either physical, spiritual, or intellectual, that belong to a different age, merely appropriated for psychological and/or political purposes.

The dialectic of history inherently drains the significance of entities as the age from which those entities find interlocutors pass by. For example, the crucifix had a certain power within Medieval Europe that has henceforth evaporated due to positivistic sciences, secularity, instrumental reason, etc. The reverence, awe, and *mysterium tremendum* that it once provoked in an earlier and more religious age has been determinedly negated.<sup>13</sup> While not entirely destroyed, as residues of that age remain preserved with us, predominately in the Catholic Church and historical memory, the historical relevance of that symbol is a mere shadow of its former self, i.e., it does not provoke the kind of immediate passions that it once did, but rather finds significance merely in nostalgia. To pretend that it invokes a passion on the level of the Medieval world, betrays its false reproducibility. Its meaning has changed because the hermeneutics of the crucifix has been determined by the age—from the religious to the secular. Additionally, to those outside of the religious community, the crucifix is merely a signifier for Catholicism; it does not signify a metaphysical reality that they must stand in awe of. Therefore, to enlist the crucifix as a sign of a former time that is assumed to be reproduceable in the present is a facile threat—one that demonstrates the falsity of the nationalists’ peripeteic dialectics.

The second falsity of nationalist peripeteic dialectics is born of the lie of religious return. Although some theorists, like the Russian Traditionalist Alexander Dugin, believe in the “reversibility of time” and that a nation-state can reclaim its former self and actualize it in the present, nationalists, especially in Western and Central Europe, have no actual interest in doing so (Dugin 2012, 67–70). Despite the “restoration of Christendom” rhetoric, which they presume would serve as a bulwark against “cultural Marxism,” multiculturalism, and particularity Islam, their attempt to resuscitate merely the exteriority of Christian symbols, and not their substantive meaning, for political purposes, betrays the

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13 Adorno made a similar observation in his *Minima Moralia*, saying, “the existence of bread factories, turning the prayer that we be given our daily bread into a mere metaphor and an avowal of desperation, argues more strongly against the possibility of Christianity than all the enlightened critiques of the life of Jesus” (Adorno 2005b, 110).

fact that they are not interested in a substantive conversion to the moral universe that proceeds from the theological dogmas of the faith itself. As demonstrated earlier, the *appearance* of a revitalized Christian identity and not a *substantive* revival of a Christian identity demonstrates second falsity of peripeteic dialectics. There is no sincere attempt to de-negate that which has already been negated through the march of history. Rather, they merely attempt to counterfeit the signs and symbols of an earlier religious age as a means to invoke, strengthen, and weaponize an already negated identity for contemporary political purposes, precisely because the present identity does not have adequate resources necessary to impede the monotonic dialectic of history. In other words, nationalists want a convincing yet false *appearance of religious identity*, not an *emergence of religious faith*. The latter, if identical to dogmas and religious moral systems, would undermine of the nationalist sentiment with its talk of universal brotherhood, equality of all, the *Imago Dei* (all mankind as being made in the image of God), and universal morality—especially the preference for the poor, the outcast, the sick, the hungry, the refugee, and the outsider.

What is true, at least from the perspective of the Frankfurt School, is that religion can still be a resource for today's society, especially its moral conundrums, as the resources of secular thought appear to be nearly exhausted due to the increasing pathology of reason (Habermas 2009). But religion, due to its history, is too ugly to appear in public, as Walter Benjamin once claimed (Benjamin 2007, 253). If religious semantics and semiotics are to survive secular modernity, they too will have to migrate into the world of the profane (Adorno 2005a, 136). This, of course, entails a *determinate negation* of religion wherein those emancipatory elements of religion are “enlisted” into struggle for a more reconciled future society, the secular equivalent to the paradisaical visions of society forwarded by the Abrahamic faiths (Benjamin 2007, 253). Peripeteic dialectics, or the reversal of time in an attempt to reconstruct a past religious age, wherein the secular contours of modernity are themselves negated, is an anachronistic false hope. The age of explicit religiosity in the West is forever gone. However, the reality of the non-reproducibility of the past will not stop nationalists from using such ideological claims to the motivate supporters in their struggle against the Willensgemeinschaften states. Indeed, as alienation within the cosmopolitan post-secular societies increases, so too will the attractiveness of peripeteic dialectics and their promises to turn back the hands of time.

## Conclusion

As argued, the modern identity crisis of Europe is an old story, one that began with the Protestant Reformation and has been given new life due to the current influx of immigrants and refugees. Just as welcoming as the heirs of the Enlightenment are towards the “others,” the anti-Enlightenment nationalists are just as unwelcoming, seeing the “invasion” of the “others” as another nail in the coffin of Europe’s organic identity. Nevertheless, their call for a “return” to a pre-political based religious identity as a means of resisting the dysgenic present proves to be untrue, delusional, and ultimately ineffective, precisely because the politically functionalized yet already determinately negated religious tradition speaks without the power and legitimacy it once had. The post-secular society, although not universally hostile to religion, remains agnostic towards it. Thus, the museum societies of Western and Central Europe—a civilization no longer at the forefront of the world-historical process—cannot return to its *völkisch* religious past as a means of preventing its modern democratic future. The bad anachronism that is produced by paligenetic ultra-nationalist Christianity only reveals the bankruptcy of contemporary European nationalism, that it cannot adequately address the present conditions with its own resources but must return to the Middle Ages to acquire the tools to reassert an organic European identity, only to find out that those tools are outdated and therefore no longer adequate to the task at hand.

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**Tytuł:** Palingenetyczne ultranacjonalistyczne chrześcijaństwo: historia, tożsamość i fałszywość dialektyki perypetycznej

**Abstrakt:** Niedawna fala europejskiego nacjonalizmu jest częściowo próbą rozwiązania trwającego kryzysu tożsamości, który rozpoczął się wraz z rewolucją burżuazyjną, wyrażającą się poprzez pozytywistyczny scjentyzm i agresywną sekularyzację, a której kulminacją był powojenny „liberalny konsensus”: demokracja przedstawicielska i kapitalizm wolnorynkowy jako „koniec historii”. Ze względu na potrzeby kapitalizmu po II wojnie światowej, w połączeniu z liberalizacją i amerykańizacją społeczeństw europejskich, w Europie rośnie obecność elementów „nie-tożsamościowych”, która jako taka ponownie poddaje analizie samą geografę tego, co oznacza być Europejczykiem. W tym esejie zgłębiam historyczny kontekst aktualnych zmagania o tożsamość, z którymi borykają się Europejczycy. Z perspektywy teorii krytycznej kwestionuję ideę, że chrześcijaństwo lub wiek chrześcijański może zostać

wskrzeszony przez ultranacjonalistów w ich próbach zwalczania kosmopolityzmu zachodniej nowoczesności. Co więcej, pokazuję, jak takie próby powrotu do wyidealizowanej tożsamości chrześcijańskiej są zakorzenione w fałszywej możliwości: dialektyce perypetycznej, czyli „dialektyce na opak”.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *Volksgemeinschaft*, *Willensgemeinschaft*, chrześcijaństwo, dialektyka perypetyczna, islamizacja, dialektyka historii, nacjonalizm, imigracja