The Role of Religion in Construction of the People and the Others: A Study of Populist Discourse in the Polish Media

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This article reflects on the roles of religion in the populist discourse in Poland. In particular, the article examines strategies of constructing the people and the others (both vertical, as in the elite, and horizontal, as in out-groups) through references to religion in Polish print media. The article offers insights into relations between populism and religion in the Polish sociopolitical context determined by strong Christian roots, the highly influential position of the Roman Catholic Church in the public sphere, and the presence of Catholic-national outlets in the media system. The findings showed that religion can be used in several ways in the populist discourse. First, it can be used to differentiate between the people who share the same religion and those who have other values and beliefs. Second, the discourse discredits the elite as either rejecting Christian values or being hypocrites. Finally, the discourse considers the institution of the Roman Catholic Church as being the elite, and thus detached from the people.

Keywords: populist discourse, religion, media content, Poland

As Zúquete (2017) observes, the study of the specific relationship between the phenomenon of populism and religion has not made significant inroads. However, it is not an absolutely neglected area of research, either. Numerous scholars (e.g., Buzalka, 2005; DeHanas & Shterin, 2018; Marzouki, McDonnell, & Roy, 2016; Palaver, 2019; Roy, 2016a; Zúquete, 2017) argue that some structural, ideological, and narrative aspects of religion interfere in populist politics.

Buzalka (2005, 2008) argues there is a specific intertwining of religion and peasant nations, and an ambivalence of communist modernization that led to the success of populism in Central and Eastern Europe. He also claims that "in almost all of its forms and transformation stages, populism mobilizes and is mobilized by some religious elements" (Buzalka, 2005, p. 2). Poland as a country with strong Christian roots, the highly influential position of the Roman Catholic Church in the public sphere, and leanings toward populist political actors among voters makes an interesting case study on how elements specific to a given political culture are articulated through populism (Stanley & Cześnik, 2018; Wysocka, 2008).

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In contrast to dominant research on populism of political actors, this study focuses on media populism that not only promotes the dissemination of populist messages formulated by other actors (populism through the media) but that also produces its own populism (populism by the media; Esser, Stępińska, & Hopmann, 2017; Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008; Plasser & Ulram, 2003). In particular, the article offers an analysis of some populist strategies employed in statements covered by Polish media outlets representing particular ideological orientations (either conservative/right-wing or liberal/left-wing).

Theoretical Background

The starting point is recognizing the characteristics of populism as a thin-centered ideology and the basic populist categories, such as the Manichean perception of society as divided into two completely separate, internally homogeneous groups and antagonistic camps: the people and the elite (Mudde, 2004; Stanley 2008). This dichotomous division valorizes the category "us" (the people) as positive and the category "them" (the elite) as negative. In other words, the essence of populism is antielitism—an attitude of opposition to all those in power (political parties, officials, but also supranational institutions and organizations).

While two of the aforementioned elements, the people and the elite, seem to be regarded as constitutive features of populism, the status of the others is still being debated in research (for a review of literature, see Lipiński, 2020a, 2020b). This article follows Brubaker's (2017) claim that both vertical (the people versus the elite) and horizonal (the people versus the out-groups) axes should be taken into consideration in the studies on populism. One of the main arguments supporting the approach is that the identity of the people is built on the principle of contrast with the constitutive outside, which entails an exclusion of certain groups from the real people to discursively construct the homogeneous community (Lipiński, 2020a, 2020b; Pelinka, 2013).

The exclusion procedure on the vertical and horizontal axes differs in the level of explicitness. In some cases, the populist discourse includes only references to the people, but in many cases the meaning of the category of the people is built on a sharply defined dichotomous division and results from the negative properties attributed to other groups (Filc, 2010; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Pelinka, 2013; Wodak, 2015). Indeed, contemporary populism can be characterized by its emphasis on an imagined homogenous people and dissociation from the others (Palaver, 2019).

The fundamental aspect is how we should conceive of a religious aspect of identity, specifically a Christian one. Indeed, we may consider two subdimensions of this identity. While the reference to Christianity is based on common faith, a reference to Christian identity represents a means of "secularizing Christianity" (Roy, 2016b, p. 3). Thereby, Christianity as a foreground of the concept of the people may lead to the exclusion of those who do not share the same religion (e.g., Muslims), while a Christian identity potentially excludes from "the common values any specific religious value, norm, or practice that could be seen as not being congruent with these dominant secular values" (Roy, 2016b, p. 3). In Western countries, the category of the others tends to focus on immigrants and Muslims, while in the non-Western variants of populism, the others can be also those who challenge a traditional model of family as well as those who represent pro-choice or LGBTQ+ rights movements (DeHanas & Shterin, 2018; Roy, 2016b).

The growing realization among political scientists that the discourse is of crucial importance for understanding populism (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2017; Aslanidis, 2016; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Laclau, 2005; Moffitt, 2016; Pauwels, 2011) leads us to follow an approach that combines Mudde's (2004) ideology-centered and Hawkins' (2010) discourse-centered understanding of populism (de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018; Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017). Accordingly, populism can be understood as discursive manifestation of a thin-centered ideology that is not only focused on the underlying "set of basic assumptions about the world" but in particular on "the language that unwittingly express them" (Hawkins, Riding, & Mudde, 2012, p. 3) or as a type of political communication that is characterized by specific, unique message elements (de Vreese et al., 2018; Reinemann et al., 2017).

Populism as a political style or repertoire of discourse (Brubaker, 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt, 2016) sets the sacred people against two opposing groups: elites and the others. The people are then understood in absolute terms as morally pure, noble (Mudde, 2004), and virtuous (Marzouki, McDonnell & Roy, 2016), and "their countries are seen as promised lands where the people have inviolable rights to the culture, heritage, jobs and other entitlements of their political communities" (DeHanas & Shterin, 2018, p. 179) or a particular "our way of life" (Brubaker, 2017, p. 1192). A very positive view of the people is often accompanied by an image of despised others (Palaver, 2019).

Following the previous studies on populist political communication (see, for example, Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016; de Vreese et al., 2018; Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, & Esser, 2017; Reinemann, Stanyer, Aalberg, Esser, & de Vreese, 2019), there are recognizable strategies used by those who are adopting the populist style, as well specific (contextual) elements of that style. In particular, references to the people can take the form of praising the virtues or achievements of the people, homogenizing the people, or demanding popular sovereignty (Blassnig et al., 2019; Wirth et al., 2016). Strategies for expressing antielitism include discrediting the elite (attributing negative characteristics: corrupt, incompetent, lazy, stupid, etc.); blaming the elite (charging responsibility for negative actions, showing negative phenomena as the results of the elite's actions, highlighting mistakes made by the elite with dire consequences for the people); and denying elite sovereignty. Finally, the strategies used to refer to out-groups consist of excluding (indicating those who do not belong to the people or are the opposite of the people) through discrediting specific groups (attributing negative characteristics), or blaming specific groups (attributing responsibility for negative actions, showing negative phenomena as the effects of the others' actions; Blassnig et al., 2019; Wirth et al., 2016).

Religion, as DeHanas and Shterin (2018) claim, "can be part and parcel of populist styles and provide an infinite variety of cultural resources in populist politics" (p. 182). Indeed, religion is often used as a tool by populism movements and aimed at creating a sense of identity and unity among the movement and stirring conflict with the adherents of other faiths. Religious values, symbols, tropes, ideas, the feelings of belonging, as well as a difference and entitlement they reinforce or even generate can be creatively and selectively used to create a particular image of the people as well as of the elites and outsiders (de la Torre, 2015, p. 10). These characteristics fit the categorization of populist as the "low way of politics," which Ostiguy (2017, p. 73) described. Zúquete (2017) states that populist actors distinguish themselves from mainstream politicians by using popular common—and culturally specific—religious vocabulary (see also van Kessel, 2016).

Adoption of the political communication perspective in the research on populism allows scholars to focus not only on ideology (expressed in statements and through actions taken by political actors) but also on the role of the media in disseminating this ideology as well as the views, attitudes, and expectations of voters (Reinemann et al., 2017). Employing this approach, we assume that the populist discourse can be used by all political actors (without primary determination of whether or not they are populist), as well as by journalists and citizens (Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; de Vreese et al., 2018; Reinemann et al., 2017; Rooduijn, 2014).

The Cultural, Sociopolitical, and Media Contexts of Populism in Poland

The identification of relations between populism and religion in the Polish sociopolitical context is an initial step in the analysis of strategies of constructing the people and the others (both the vertical of the people versus the elite, and the horizontal versus the out-groups) through references to religion.

First, there is a long tradition of Christianity (since 966) and high levels of both the Polish people's declared religiosity, and the homogeneity of the religiosity. More than 90% of the Polish people declare they belong to the Roman Catholic Church (Turska-Kawa & Wojtasik, 2017), which makes religion a common element of the Polish national identity (Turska-Kawa & Wojtasik, 2020). Since the main source of populist legitimacy is the people, perceived as a homogenous group, religion sounds like a solid point of reference for those who want to appeal to all the Poles.

Consequently, most Polish right-wing political actors refer to religious values in their political agenda (Przyłęcki, 2012). One of the radical cases concerned Liga Polskich Rodzin (League of the Polish Families, hereafter LPR), which represented the right-wing, national, and Catholic orientation. The LPR referred directly to God, Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church, and Pope John Paul II, as well to the traditional family model in its official documents, election agenda, and statements. The LPR politicians excluded from the people all those who are not Catholics and discredited those who did not shared the negative opinions on abortion, in vitro, or homosexuality (Przyłęcki, 2012).

References to religion have also been found in political documents and statements made by politicians representing the two current mainstream political parties, namely Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, hereafter PiS) and Platforma Obywatelska (Civic Platform, hereafter PO; see Przyłęcki, 2012). Although both political parties are right-wing oriented, PiS (the party in power since 2015) is more conservative and tradition oriented, while PO represents the more liberal wing. The fierce competition between these two political parties has been determining the political scene in Poland for 15 years now, deepening the political polarization, mostly in election and postelection periods.

The second factor fostering the presence of religion in the populist discourse is the strong position of the Roman Catholic Church (as an institution) in the public sphere. Indeed, the Church is one of the most exclusive bearers of national identity (Buzalka, 2005). It is worth remembering that the Church played an important role in communist resistance and during the entire history of the country, including the period of the nation without a state (1795–1918), by providing influential intellectual and political leadership for society (Buzalka, 2005). The Church plays an important role in discussions concerning many aspects of

social, cultural, and political life such as education, family issues, and the law on reproduction (Buzalka, 2005). With such a high level of political engagement, the Church is both an object and the subject of populist political communication. It may be regarded as a reference point for both those who want to appeal to Polish national identity or the elite who is discredited or blamed.

The third factor fostering religious populism in Poland is the strong position of the right-wing-oriented media outlets, including an ultra-Catholic media network consisting of a radio station Radio Maryja, daily newspaper *Nasz Dziennik*, and TV station Telewizja Trwam. All three media outlets as well as their originator, the Roman Catholic priest Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, actively participate in the Polish political debate, supporting right-wing political actors such as LPR, which was supplanted by PiS, and criticizing liberal political parties, including PO. The network's worldview divides the world between the faithful and good people and their enemies sometimes perceived and articulated in a conspiratorial manner, with clear traces of anti-Semitism, anti-Masonicism, and anti-Islam (Lipiński, 2020b; Zúquete, 2017). With their political engagement, these media outlets clearly illustrate the political parallelism characterizing the Polish media system, where individual media organizations represent specific political positions rather than reflect the pluralism of the public sphere (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011). All three media outlets, alongside with other conservative media organizations, constitute communicative, cultural, and system foundations of the religious right-wing political parties in Poland by publicizing the voice of right-wing politicians, legitimizing their message, and providing an interpretative framework and normative arguments to justify political decisions (Lipiński, 2020a). These media organizations are also regarded as a political subculture (Nowak & Riedel, 2009) promoting a certain version of Polish Catholicism as an "ideology of struggle" (PorterSzűcs, 2011, p. 271; see also Zúquete, 2017).

Data and Methods

This study addresses the roles of religion in the populist discourse in Poland. In particular, we trace the use of references to religion in the statements referring to the people, the elite, and the others. We also examine how references to religion are used in populist discourse reported by media outlets representing either a conservative or liberal orientation, regardless of the speaker.

In other words, we aim to recognize how often references to religion are made in statements including any of three basic populist strategies (people-centeredness, antielitism, and exclusion of the others) originating from politicians, journalists, or any other sources quoted in the media. Also, we analyze particular messages representing these strategies in the statements, such as praising the virtues or achievements of the people, homogenizing the people, demanding popular sovereignty, discrediting or blaming the elite, denying elite sovereignty, indicating those who do not belong to the people or are the opposite of the people through discrediting or blaming specific groups (Blassnig et al., 2019; Wirth et al., 2016).

For our study, we selected several media outlets according to three criteria: type (national quality press/broadsheet and national popular press/tabloids) and political leaning (left/center/right; see Table 1). The sample included four daily outlets, that is three national broadsheets, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Nasz Dziennik*, and one national tabloid, *Fakt.* The empirical corpus was complemented with two weekly magazines—*Polityka* and *Tygodnik Do Rzeczy*.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Media Outlets in the Study.

	Frequency	Type	Average daily/weekly circulation*	Political orientation
Gazeta Wyborcza	Daily	Broadsheet	244,811	Center-left (liberal)
Rzeczpospolita	Daily	Broadsheet	64,414	Center-right
Nasz Dziennik	Daily	Broadsheet	Data not available	Right-wing (conservative)
Fakt	Daily	Tabloid	435,050	Center
Polityka	Weekly	Broadsheet	171,516	Center-left (liberal)
Tygodnik Do Rzeczy	Weekly	Broadsheet	119,305	Right-wing

Note. Author's own elaboration. *Source: Kurdupski (2016a, 2016b).

The study used print research material from the years 2015–17. The period covered the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections and the postelection period (2016–17). These years are perceived as the fourth wave of populism in Poland (Stępińska, Lipiński, Hess, & Piontek, 2017) that started in 2015, with the double electoral victory of PiS and the stunning success of Paweł Kukiz, the populist political leader in the presidential elections (he came third with 20.8% of votes). Additionally, the refugee crisis in Europe, which coincided to a large extent with the parliamentary elections campaign in 2015, was an important situational factor determining the presence of populist messages in the media content.

The materials selected for content analysis were those published during the two weeks preceding the voting days in 2015, while for the postelection period (2016 and 2017) we used a constructed week for each year, which consisted of six days (February 22; March 1, 9, 17 and 25; April 2, 2016; and February 20 and 28; March 8, 16, 24; and April 1, 2017). Materials for the analysis were selected using keywords involving the names of 11 main political parties and 19 political leaders.

The decisive criterion for the selection of items for the study was the presence of at least one of the following populist categories: a reference to the people, antielitism, or the exclusion of an out-group. A total of 1,544 press articles met these criteria (with 561 items referring to the people, 1,336 items including a critical attitude toward the elite, and 116 items including a negative attitude toward out-groups). We also selected items including any reference to religion that could be manifested by references to Christian/Catholic values, God, Pope John Paul II, or the Roman Catholic Church (Przyłęcki, 2012). We found 43 such items.

For the purpose of this study, we conducted both quantitative and qualitative content analysis. While the former allowed us to examine the frequency of the use of any references to religion in the populist statements covered by selected print media, the latter was indispensable for recognizing particular populist strategies used in statements combining references to the people, criticism toward the elite, or exclusion of the others with references to religion.

Results

Frequency of References to Religion in Populist Statements

First, we checked the presence of references to religion in the news items defining the people, the elites, and the out-groups. The findings show that 5% of all the items including a reference to the people framed that category through a reference to religion (see Table 2). Still, there are differences between the media outlets. Unsurprisingly, the highest percentage of the items including statements portraying the people as those who share the same religion occurred in the Catholic newspaper *Nasz Dziennik* (almost 20%) and the right-wing conservative weekly magazine *Tygodnik Do Rzeczy* (around 6%). In the liberal quality media outlets, *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Polityka*, fewer items referred to the people and religion (5% and 4%, respectively), while in the tabloid daily newspaper *Fakt*, there was not a single statement linking these two elements between 2015 and 2017.

A reference to religion was more often used (in general) when describing the others (see Table 2). Of all the items making any reference to the out-groups, around 10% included the category of religious others, described as those who do not share religion with the people. However, we noticed two patterns across the media outlets. The first was the lack of religious frame in the news items covering the others that we found in liberal or center-right daily newspapers (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*, and *Fakt*). The second was the not significantly high but still noticeably frequent use of references to religion in creating the image of the others traced in two conservative media outlets: *Nasz Dziennik* and *Tygodnik Do Rzeczy*, as well as in the liberal, left-wing oriented weekly magazine *Polityka*.

Table 2. Religion as a Component of Definitions of the People, the Elite, and Out-Groups (%).

	Religious people	Catholic Church as the elite	Religious out-groups
Gazeta Wyborcza	5.3	2.0	0
Rzeczpospolita	3.8	0.3	0
Nasz Dziennik	19.6	0	12.5
Fakt	0	0	0
Polityka	3.9	0.3	16.3
Tygodnik Do Rzeczy	6.3	0	14.3
Total	5.0	0.6	10.3

Note. Author's own elaboration.

The analysis of the presence of populist strategies in the news items clearly showed that in the right-wing media (*Nasz Dziennik* and *Tygodnik Do Rzeczy*) there are traces of exclusions of the others through discrediting specific groups (attributing negative characteristics) or blaming specific groups (attributing responsibility for negative actions, showing negative phenomena as the effects of the others' actions). In the conservative weekly magazine *Tygodnik Do Rzeczy*, as many as 67% of the items referring to the others described by religion included both of the aforementioned strategies.

By contrast, the liberal weekly magazine *Polityka* did make references to religion while covering the out-groups, but they were not accompanied by populist strategies targeting the out-groups, but by antielitism. Indeed, 37.5% of the items covering the religious others included a critical approach toward the elites.

At the same time, as many as 88% of all the items with a reference to religion included an antielitist statement. However, less than 1% of items criticized the institution of the Roman Catholic Church or high-ranking clergymen (the liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza* was the most critical toward the Church elite) per se. Therefore, we may argue that references to religion were employed to attack the political elite by ideological opponents, rather than to openly criticize the religious elite.

To recognize which specific religion-related characteristics, qualities, and features are attributed to the people, the elite, and the others in media outlets of different political leanings, we conducted in-depth qualitative content analysis of four selected media outlets with the strongest ideological orientations—that is, the liberal daily newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the left-wing oriented weekly magazine *Polityka*, the conservative right-wing oriented weekly magazine *Tygodnik Do Rzeczy*, and the Catholic ultraconservative daily newspaper *Nasz Dziennik*.

Constructing the People Through References to Religion

The populist discourse primes certain aspects of the identity of citizens to generate a sense of belonging to an imagined community and, at the same time, to detach or exclude a specific group from that community (Reinemann et al., 2017). We may distinguish several mechanisms regulating the ways in which the concept of the people is constructed (Lipiński, 2020a). One portrays the people as a homogenous entity that share common opinions, values, or interests.

This particular mechanism was clearly visible in the empirical material under analysis. Indeed, all four media outlets under study covered statements including a concept of the religious people built on references to Christianity, Catholicism, and the Roman Catholic Church. However, depending on the ideological orientation of the media organization, the imagined community was associated with different perspectives on Christianity and different aspects of a shared religion.

The most explicit references to the elements of religion occurred in the Catholic daily newspaper *Nasz Dziennik*, which portrayed Poland by the use of religious vocabulary. In the media outlet's discourse, Poland is presented as "our home blessed with the sign of the cross made by God" (Kozłowski, 2015, p. 4) and the "Mother Heartland, trustful Mother, wise Teacher, and Handmaid of incarnate Word" (Kozłowski, 2015, p. 4). The paper defines the Poles explicitly as Christians, Catholics, as well as "heirs to Pope John Paul II's wisdom." Among the main values inherent in "Catholic people," according to *Nasz Dziennik*, are sacrifice (in the name of God), marriage, family, children, and life.

The discourse presented in *Nasz Dziennik* was coherent with the one used by PiS politicians who employ a strict and narrow definition of religious people by perceiving three elements—namely, Polishness, the Roman Catholic Church, and Christianity—as inextricably linked. Such statements made by PiS politicians were also

covered (critically) by the liberal newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza,* as the following quote from Krzysztof Szczerski's article, which was originally published in *Pressje* in 2005, reveals:

> Poland as a state and the Poles as a nation are able to read the rules and order derived from Christianity. Christian morality codified by the Catholic Church is the only common set of rules, originating from the Poles' shared experience, that may regulate the public sphere. A radicalization of the Christian virtues in the public sphere is a means to establish a confessional republic in Poland, that is a combination of republic rules with an absolute duty to follow a moral order in public life. The state should control how that duty is obeyed. The confessional republic us an element of moral fundamentalism and this is how Polish policy should look like. . . . Today we need a dictatorship of the Gospel in the Polish public sphere. (Editors, 2015, p. 21)

On the other hand, liberal, left-wing media outlet *Polityka* reported statements coherent with an ideological perspective of the media organization, defining Polish identity by references to general Christian values including the tolerance of solidarity and the coexistence of a different approach to religion, such as: "generally peaceful, although not without any tensions, the coexistence of the Poles: traditional Catholics, conservatives, liberals, open-minded, close-minded, protestants, Jews, representatives of the Orthodox Church, agnostics, and even atheists" (Dorn, 2017, p. 9).

Although the homogenization of the people is often linked to the other mechanism—that is, praising the people's virtues and activities—the Polish populist right-wing communications represent the people through victimization rather than positive traits (Lipiński, 2020a, 2020b). Accordingly, the Polish (religious) identity is something that needs to be defended and protected. As Jarosław Kaczyński, a leader of PiS claimed:

> In Poland we need to protect the values with historical policy that will defend the Polish dignity. We need to protect everything that is the foreground of Polishness. We cannot break it off from our faith in the Church and Catholicism. (Piłat, 2015, p. 5)

The identification of the religious dimension of the discursive identity of the people as the main element of the populist logic was the first step in the qualitative analysis of the media content. The next step was to examine how the elite was constructed through references to religion in the statements covered by selected media.

Constructing the Elite Through References to Religion

Findings of the quantitative analysis revealed that the relation between religion and criticism toward the elite can be twofold. Primarily, although clergymen usually define themselves as being part of the people, coming from the people, working for the people, and devoted to God and its people (Stavrakakis, 2002), the institutional Roman Catholic Church and high-ranking clergymen can be seen as the epitome of the elite and, as such, criticized in the statements covered by the media or expressed by journalists themselves.

For this reason, in the liberal and left-wing Polish media (namely, *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Polityka*) are many statements accusing the Church of becoming a radical rightwing-oriented (nationalist) political elite, such as:

When a priest in Strachocin allowed Duda [presidential candidate of PiS] to use a pulpit in church during his speech, I thought than nothing worse can happen anymore. But it did happen. Now Duda's campaign headquarter launched its branch in the General Curia. (Wiśniewska, 2015, p. 2)

The other example of similar criticism toward the Church comes from a journalist working for *Polityka*:

The Church started as an ally of democracy but after almost three decades one may see that it yanked as much as it wanted from politicians while making Poland hardcore right-wing oriented and supporting the neo-nationalist mentality at the same time. (Jażdżewski, 2017, p. 26)

Furthermore, the Church was blamed for its excessive influence on, or even control over, state and public institutions, such as public media: "And we fall on our faces in front of the church—an institution that built its power based on confession, i.e., on denunciation. The church controls the state using denunciation. And if there is no state, it controls society. . . . The Church teaches corruption" (Klich, 2015, p. 26) and "picture of [Public Radio Station 1] as a frightened, not to say—defeated institution, controlled by PiS and Church, or maybe we should use the other order: the Church and PiS" (Rzeczkowski, 2017, p. 24).

Alongside reporting statements blaming the Church for its political engagement, the liberal media covered statements discrediting the Church by portraying it as an institution with serious internal problems and flaws such, as corruption, greed, and cynicism, that are the opposite of the moral virtues expected from a religious entity. For example, a philosophy and ethics expert quoted in *Gazeta Wyborcza* described the Catholic Church as an "institution that has been oppressing the people of Europe and America for dozens of centuries, not to say more. . . . The Church I am ashamed of, and need to justify" (Hartman, 2015, p. 35).

Lastly, the media discredited the Church by presenting it as an institution that shares opinions and performs activities that contradict such Christian virtues as tolerance, integration, and solidarity. Instead, the Church is portrayed as an institution promoting social and cultural division, intolerance, and hate speech in statements like the one made by a legal expert cited in *Gazeta Wyborcza*: "The Church is training us and teaches us some practices that allow people to be divided, setting one on the other, making them their enemies and calling for crusades" (Kublik, 2015, p. 12), or by a social psychology expert cited by *Gazeta Wyborcza*: "Priest Oko uses the neutral term 'gay.' He is not cursing, but he is still using hate speech" (Jucewicz, 2015, p. 40), and "One of the speakers, Father Ireneusz Skubiś claimed that Poland must keep the Christian identity of the Old Continent [pre-reformation Europe] where there is no Mahomet, no Marx and Engels and [none of] those promoting gender studies" (Tym, 2017, p. 103).

Interestingly, the critical attitude toward the Church was expressed in the liberal media not only by politicians, journalists, and experts representing liberal ideology but also by right-wing populist political

actors, who tend to introduce themselves as being "true believers." In the statement covered by *Gazeta Wyborcza*, a right-wing political actor combines the creed with a negative evaluation of the Church in Poland: "There is no doubt that the church is a pathology now" (Niemczyńska, 2015, p. 20).

Secondly, the construction of the religious community of the people made it possible to employ the strategy of blaming the political elite for being dependent on the discredited institution of the Polish Church. This mechanism was found, for example, in the left-wing media outlet *Polityka*, in statements made by journalists accusing the PiS government for becoming a subordinate of the Church and adjusting directions of policy and particular political activities to the Church's standpoints, such as: "The most important positions in the public radio have been taken by people who do not even hide how attached they are to the dominant religious institution" (Rzeczkowski, 2017, p. 24), and "Polish Label of Securities (also state-owned) organized a conference entitled 'There is no Europe without the cross'" (Tym, 2017, p. 103).

On the other hand, the political elite could be discredited for detaching itself from the Church and Christian community (that is, the people). Such a discursive strategy was traced in statements referring to the PO politicians covered by the conservative *Nasz Dziennik* in following statements: "President [B. Komorowski] publicly speaks against the Church" (Karczewski, 2015, p. 10); "During the previous elections, [then-prime minister] Ewa Kopacz in the political spot advertising PO called it the presence of the cross in the public sphere 'a rubbish'" (Kozłowski, 2015, p. 4); and "They [political opposition to PiS] formed a coalition in Sejm [the lower chamber of the Polish parliament] and they follow the same path regarding the struggle against Christian civilization and the Poles' sense of tradition and community" (Walaszczyk, 2015b, p. 5).

The negative evaluation of the political elite detaching itself from the Church may even lead to its explicit exclusion from the Polish public sphere traced in the following statement: "There is no future for any political party that is trying to eliminate Catholics, the Church, tradition and Polish culture from the public life" (Bartnik, 2015, p. 17).

The strategy of discrediting "the elite" through references to religion was also used in the statements referring to the European Union (an external political elite), covered by right-wing media in our sample—namely, *Tygodnik Do Rzeczy* and *Nasz Dziennik*. Both media outlets tend to present Poland as the civilization of life, with a strong national and cultural identity and its devotion to God, Church, and the spiritual aspects of humanity. By contrast, the European Union is presented in these media outlets as a symbol of secularist elites representing an atheist, secular world shaped by cultural revolution that leads to a moral relativism, hedonism, and the civilization of death (see also Pałka, 2012/2013; Prokurat, 2008) that can be found in a statement like this one made by a PiS politician in *Tygodnik Do Rzeczy*: "From the point of view of the culture that has lasted for more than 2.5 thousand years and that has been defined by Christian and Antic heritage, the current EU ideology may be perceived as barbaric" (Ćiosić, 2016, p. 22).

Constructing the Others Through References to Religion

As Palaver (2019) argues, populism and religion both relate strongly to fear. While populism stokes fear and is strengthened by its increase, religion is one of the oldest means of responding to human fears. Indeed, by recognizing the enemy it may integrate the people, enhance social divisions employing a worldview that divides the world between the faithful people and their diabolical enemies (Zúquete, 2017), or support populists' demand for scapegoats (those who are accused of causing the fear-evoking crisis; Wodak, 2015).

Unsurprisingly, the findings of the quantitative content analysis showed that references to religion were most frequently used in the populist messages constructing a category of the others covered by the studied conservative media organizations—*Nasz Dziennik* and *Tygodnik Do Rzeczy*.

We recognized three main categories of out-groups in the right-wing media outlets. The external religious others who do not share the Christian (Catholic) religion with the Poles constitutes first category. They were explicitly named as "Muslims" or "Islamic groups" and often portrayed as a serious threat to the religious and cultural homogeneity of the Polish people, as in the following statement:

> One is aware that a presence of Islamic groups will be an excuse for removing the crosses from schools because those crosses may offend Islamic minorities' religious sentiments. It has already happened in Belgium where the Christmas tree was removed due to the Muslims' explicit request. Belgium was the Catholic country a few years ago. The same may happen to Poland. (Walaszczyk, 2015b, p. 5).

They were also blamed for their disrespectful, mocking, and arrogant attitude toward the people and the tendency to violate strong norms related to the Christian (Catholic) faith and Polish cultural values, such as respect toward women.

The other strategy employed in the right-wing populist discourse to strengthening the aversion to Islam and discredit the refugees was raising doubts about the motives of those who are trying to reach European countries, as in a statement made by a Czech president Miloš Zeman cited by *Nasz Dziennik*:

> No one knows how many of them are economic immigrants or Jihad militants, and how many of them are real refugees. If someone does not register himself and not apply for an asylum in the first EU country he arrived in, we should assume that he is not a victim of war. (Falkowski, 2015, p. 1)

It is worth mentioning that in some cases the religious outgroups were discursively linked to the political elite to discredit it. The political elite was portrayed as ignoring the people's concerns and blamed for increasing the risk:

> Acting under EU pressure, the Polish government is putting the nation at risk. Around 100,000 immigrants may come to Poland after the elections. Polish public opinion is being

foolish because Prime Minister Kopacz and her government secretly agreed on that. (Kozłowski, 2015, p. 4)

The second category of the others are representatives of the Western secular world (external secular others). The theme of secularization resonates well with other very influential features common to both the Church and populism—that is, martyrology. Buzalka (2005) writes that according to the Church's narrative, the institution was always assailed by the power-holders "because it did not subordinate itself to secular power, because it remained bound by the 'Law of God'" (p. 13). The discourse presented in the right-wing media outlets also offers a vision of forces aiming at the de-Christianization of Europe and repressing traditional structures with secular modernization, like in the statement made by a French Catholic politician Bernard Antony, cited in *Nasz Dziennik*: "By the renunciation of their Christian roots and values, the Western European societies fall into the nihilism that destroys our faith, culture, and demographic future" (Walaszczyk, 2015a, p. 3).

Finally, references to the Roman Catholic Church and Catholicism were employed for the exclusion of the internal others. The content analysis of *Nasz Dziennik* and *Tygodnik Do Rzeczy* revealed that the typical internal adversaries of the people included supporters of sexual education, LGBTQ+ rights, the idea of the secular state, the in vitro procedure, as well as pro-choice organizations.

Interestingly, for the right-wing media, sharing the Christian or even Catholic faith may not be enough to belong to the people if the ideological orientation is perceived as wrong. The so-called leftie Catholics were as greatly excluded as those who were not Catholics at all.

Discussion

The article aimed to examine the roles of religion in the stylistic inflections of populism in Poland. The main goal of the study was to recognize the strategies for constructing the people and the others (both vertical, as in the people versus the elite, and horizontal, as in the people versus out-groups) through references to religion used in statements covered by selected Polish print media.

The findings of the quantitative analysis showed that references to religion were most frequently used in statements including a concept of the others, while they were relatively rarely employed to define the people or the elite. The findings can be explained by the special circumstances of 2015, during which the double campaign for presidential and parliamentary elections in Poland overlapped with the refugee crisis in Europe. The combination of the fierce rivalry between political actors in the domestic political scene with the threat of waves of the others approaching the country seemed to foster mediated populist political communication in general, and calls for the protection of religious and cultural homogeneity in particular.

Still, we were able to trace some patterns in the media outlets representing different ideological and political orientation. Namely, the concepts of the religious people and religious others were frequently present in statements covered by the Catholic ultraconservative daily newspaper *Nasz Dziennik*, one of the media outlets related to Father Rydzyk. At the same time, it was the liberal, anti-PiS quality newspaper

Gazeta Wyborcza that most frequently covered critical statements referring to the Church as the (political) elite.

The qualitative analysis of the populist statements covered by the media revealed that religion was used to build an image of a religious heartland and appeal to good Christian people. However, it was mainly employed as a means to identify the others, whose faith was considered to be incompatible with Polish culture and values, as well as those who seemed to disrespect Poles' commitment to religious practice and to the Roman Catholic Church.

In particular, the findings showed that religion can be used in five main ways in the populist discourse. First, it may serve to describe the people as those who share the same religion. Secondly, it may be used to discredit the elite as either rejecting Christian values, or thirdly, accusing the elite of being hypocrites whose performances do not reflect Christian virtues. Fourthly, the populist discourse considers the Roman Catholic Church as the elite and consequently criticizes, discredits, and portrays the Church as being detached from the people. Finally, the populist discourse distinguishes the out-groups and excludes them from the people due to the other system of values and beliefs the out-groups represent.

A variation of the discursive constructions of the people and the others (both vertical and horizontal), which the Polish print media presented is determined by the political orientation of the media organizations (see Table 3). In the conservative, right-wing media outlets, journalists and other speakers (such as politicians, experts, and representatives of the Church) portray the people predominantly through explicit references to Christianity and the Roman Catholic Church and associations with a traditional heterosexual family, radical antiabortion attitude (pro-life movement), and the total rejection of either contraception or in-vitro methods.

Table 3. Religion and Populist Discourse in Politically Oriented Media in Poland.

Populist discourse	Conservative/right-wing oriented media outlets	Liberal/left-wing oriented media outlets
Defining the people	God, Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church, homogeneity, tradition, heartland, life, family, John Paul II	Christianity, tolerance, diversity, choice, freedom, solidarity, integration
Discrediting and blaming the elite	Liberals, the EU	The Roman Catholic Church (institution), high rank clergymen (bishops), "pseudo-Catholic politicians"
Discrediting and blaming the out-groups	Muslims, Islam, LGBT community, "leftie Catholics," foreigners	"Christian hypocrites"

Note. Author's own elaboration.

All these elements serve immediately as the basis for defining which Polish societal group does not belong to the people. The conservative discourse perceives all those who oppose the aforementioned values

and attitudes through their support for any pro-choice options as wanting to act like God and should therefore be condemned.

Religiously inflected references to the people are a valuable resource for defining external enemies, as people who not only differ from the people, but also threaten the nation's homogeneity or even its existence. The primary category of the others in the modern right-wing populist discourse is Islam (Lipiński, 2020b). The second category is Euroscepticism, which is an important theme in right-wing populist communication strategies. Right-wing politicians and the media conduct the struggle against the immoral secularization and laicization of the Western countries and portray the peoples of the EU as spiritually alien foreigners or secularist elites.

The liberal, left-wing political and media discourse, on the other hand, operates within Christian values of tolerance, diversity, choice, freedom, solidarity, and integration. Those who claim to be Christians but exclude the others based on religion-related premises are accused of being hypocrites (a charge leveled against the political elite).

Furthermore, the left-wing oriented politicians and the media seem to separate faith and the institutional religion (i.e., the Church). This distinction allows them to use strategies discrediting the Church and high-ranking clergymen as another type of the elite more frequently in comparison to conservative media outlets.

The findings support the observations of DeHanas and Shterin (2018) that the use of religiously inflected resources in the populist discourse to a small extent derives from theological traditions. Predominantly, the populist discourse represents a bricolage (Altglas, 2014) that is "a selective and purposeful construction of religiously inflected images and references from existing cultural resources" (DeHanas & Shterin, 2018, p. 182).

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