

Under God’s Consent: An Examination of ‘Religious Tradition’ as a Nodal-Point for Illiberal Alliances in Hungary and the United States

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Abstract: In the following paper I construct an argument for how “illiberal democracy” operates as a *floating signifier* for a more defined ethno-religious political program. While the term is employed by figures on the populist-right, it obscures what is driving the relationship between Hungarian and American conservatives.¹ If illiberal democracy is a *floating signifier* then there must be another ideology that grounds Orbán’s rhetoric with his base. Following the work of András Máté-Tóth, who tied Central European right-wing populism to a “wounded collective identity,” I argue that *religious tradition* binds together this wounded collective identity and operates as a *nodal point* in Orbán’s rhetoric.² Thus, illiberalism or illiberal democracy represents a malleable program for a restorative, ethno-religious nationalism. In short, illiberal democracy is grounded in the politicized language of ‘Judeo-Christian’ values, an Antemurale myth, and the crisis of Christian persecution. Finally, and arguably most interesting, this paper attempts to explain Orbán’s exceptional influence within American conservative politics through a post-structuralist analysis of his CPAC speech. A post-structuralist discourse analysis reveals how *religious tradition* operates as a shared language between Hungarian and American conservatism.

Keywords: Hungary, United States, Orbán, Christian Nationalism, Illiberalism

Introduction

At the most recent CPAC convention the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán spoke to the growing

Christian-nationalist movements in both his nation and the United States. Not one to be shy about his language, Orbán contended that a “trust” in Judeo-Christian

1 The term “floating signifier” is central to the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In short, a floating signifier is an empty term that redirects political animosities or attitudes towards another. See: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Verso, 2001).

2 The concept of “Religious Tradition” that I reference is developed in the following two works: Martin Riesebradt, *The Promise of Salvation: A Theory of Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 2010); Geneviève Zubrzycki, “Religion, Religious Tradition, and Nationalism: Jewish Revival in Poland and ‘Religious Heritage’ in Québec,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51, no. 3 (2012): 442–55.

teachings would deliver the west victory against adversarial leftists, cultural-Marxists, and liberals.³ This language is not new from the Fidesz leader, and yet on American soil it resonated with a Republican party that has become increasingly entrenched in the vernacular of the ‘culture wars’—Christianity vs. secularism, Americanism vs. liberalism, etc. Orbán’s presence at the American CPAC convention is not only noteworthy, but offers Americanists a rare opportunity to assess the impact of foreign political developments on domestic politics. In particular, the growing influence of Viktor Orbán’s style of ‘illiberal democracy’ among the American right.

What does illiberal democracy mean exactly? It has been over 25 years since Fareed Zakaria defined the term in *Foreign Affairs* as, “a form of government that mixes a substantial degree of democracy with a substantial degree of illiberalism,” the latter represented in restrictions on speech and press, the curtailing of liberties, and threats to human rights (Zakaria 1997, 24). In the late 20th century, Zakaria considered nations like Russia (then under Boris Yeltsin), Belarus, and Romania as paradigmatic illiberal democracies.⁴ However, a quarter century later the term has found renewed meaning in what may be surprising locations for commentators in 1997—those nations with movements that have either outwardly embraced illiberal democracy or that have hitched their wagon to its momentum include the Philippines, Turkey, Brazil, and the United States.

Yet it is Hungary, once a beacon of post-soviet democratic ambitions, that has become the bellwether for illiberal politics. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has championed his state’s path towards illiberal democracy by rejecting the authority of supranational institutions (like the EU and UN); defining national belonging in ethnic rather than civic terms; and touting a distrust of domestic political opposition. The weight of Orbán’s political program rests not in his blanket calls to illiberalism, but in what illiberal democracy has come to identify and sanction within his rhetoric. In fact, illiberal democracy lacks weight as a standalone term – it is what some scholars may colloquially call a ‘garbage term’ in political science. Rather, as this paper demonstrates, illiberal democracy draws its power and meaning by triggering a constellation of racial-religious

attitudes. This less visible racial-religious message allows Orbán to successfully tout his vision of illiberal democracy to receptive audiences in the United States. In turn, American conservatives reinterpret Orbán’s political program within their own historical and social context.

Methodological Approach & Case Study

I. Post-Structuralist Discourse Analysis

Given Orbán’s recent appearances at the Conservative Political Action Conferences (first in Budapest in May 2022; the second in Dallas in August of the same year), I have chosen to focus the analysis on his address in Dallas. The Dallas speech is chosen for two reasons: (I) it is representative of not only Orbán’s domestic political presence, but also his international presence; and (II) the speech situates Orbán in direct conversation with his American interlocutors. While his Dallas speech forms the basis of the analysis, it is important to recognize that discourse is embedded in historical, social, and political fields (Wodak and De Cilla and Reisigl 1999, 149). Therefore, in acknowledging discursive context, this analysis draws upon other addresses from Viktor Orbán as well as important historical and political events that shape the context of his discourse. In addition to Orbán’s CPAC speeches, a comparative analysis is established through a brief look at the discourse of his American interlocutors—like former President Donald Trump, CPAC chairman Matt Schlapp, and media personalities like Rod Dreher and Tucker Carlson. The two CPAC conferences and the media surrounding them offer an ideal case study for the discursive transfer of conservative and illiberal thought.

As stated earlier, the objective of this study is to further our understanding of the deeper meaning and implications behind the discursive push for illiberal democracy and, the strange marriage between the Hungarian far-right and the American far-right. To achieve this Orbán’s CPAC address is approached through a post-structuralist lens. Rather than focusing on the structural or institutional drivers of illiberalism, this investigation operates on the understanding that ‘illiberal democracy’ is itself a political discourse that

3 Hungarian Government, “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of CPAC Texas” (Speech, Dallas, August 4, 2022), www.miniszterelnok.hu.

4 It is important to note that Zakaria’s initial definition of “illiberal democracy” is not politically neutral. His article in *Foreign Affairs* makes the positive argument for liberal democracy in the late 20th century; therefore, illiberal democracy was originally offered as a term that could explain the absence of liberal democratic principles in a functioning democracy.

advocates and justifies the short-circuiting of democratic structures and institutions. This study supports the theory that discourse shapes societal problems and the corresponding modes of political organization (Hartz 2019, 3).

To further explore the discursive construction of illiberal democracy, I employ a methodological schema introduced in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, that is further developed in the context of Central European conservatism by Christian Lamour and Ronald Hartz. From the Laclauian perspective, populist discursive output is characterized by a *chain of equivalence*. Lamour defines this as “the association of different demands and identities that can be substituted by one another to construct the demarcation between the in-group and the out-group” (Lamour 2022, 320). For Laclau and Mouffe, the chain of equivalence is the most general condition of existence and hegemonic formation (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 144). This theory holds that difference alone is not sufficient to construct social and hegemonic limits (i.e., who/what is *in*, and who/what is *out*); rather, because the field of difference is a “field of infinitude”—meaning infinite possibilities of difference and boundary formation— there must exist a process by which an ensemble of differences are reduced to a totalizing trait, ideology, or primordial characteristic (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 143).

Simply put, populist discourses must identify a central point (the technical term being *nodal point*) of difference that structures the boundaries of who belongs and who does not. Importantly, this logic of difference is not only a process that introduces negative difference into the social realm (‘us’ v. ‘them’) but also

a process of self-signification, whereby the self is defined in the transformation of one’s limits/boundaries into frontiers.

In summary, the discursive *chain of equivalence* is built upon: (I) the framing of crisis or dislocation; (II) the discursive employment of *empty signifiers* like ‘the people’ or the ‘elite’ that are defined by their conflicting identities and/or antagonistic relationship; (III) *floating signifiers* that ambiguously represent the ideas, place or issues that the political struggle is over (like “immigration” or “freedom”); and (IV) a *nodal point* that partially fixes meaning to the *floating* and *empty* signifiers.⁵ The last component of the discursive chain is critical as the *nodal point* shapes the political imaginary. For example, in left-wing populist movements “revolution” has often been a nodal point, framing claims to action, belonging, and objectives. As Ronald Hartz writes, the nodal point “functions as a hegemonic representative of various demands and constitutes the chain of equivalence” (Hartz 2019, 6).

Any study of right-wing discourse must therefore identify a nodal point or privileged signifier whose meaning is established within the discourse, and which partially fixes the political language that is contested or ambiguous. Applying this Laclauian model, I argue that illiberal democracy operates as a floating signifier built on an antagonistic demarcation against all that is pejoratively associated with liberal democracy. The nodal point in this discourse is not necessarily fixed, and in the case of Viktor Orbán often fluctuates depending on his audience. However, one nodal point that has figured prominently into the discourse of

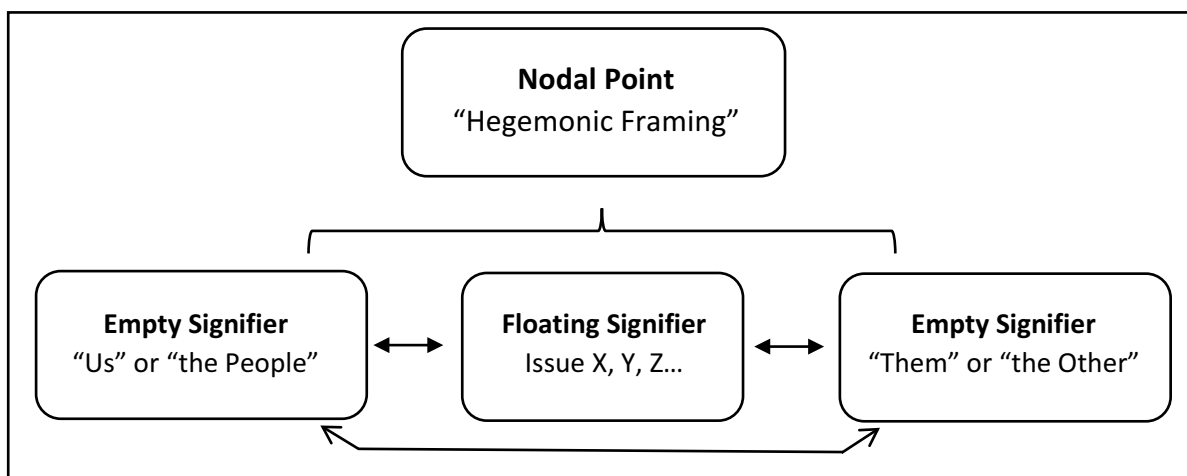


Figure 1. Populist Chain of Equivalence.

5 See Figure 1.

Central European populism—particularly in the case of Hungary and Poland—is *religious tradition*. Calls to respect and/or revive religious tradition have fixed ‘meta-populist’ discourses and alliances across the Atlantic (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, 301-319).

II. Religion v. Religious Tradition

In a recent publication, Christian Lamour suggested that ‘Christianity’ operates as the nodal point of Orbán’s populist discourse through: (I) “the density of Christian references used to shape a negative and antagonistic discourse, strategically adjusted to his audience”; (II) “the use of Christianity to ground three ideological pillars of the radical right (populism, nativism, and authoritarianism)”; and (III) “the mobilization of Christianity to organize a hegemonic struggle against the dominant political force that has defined the meaning of this religion in the European public sphere” (Lamour 2020, 317). Lamour directs scholarship in the right direction, and his work recognizes that the antagonistic divisions in Orbán’s rhetoric, especially since the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis, are commonly structured around the duality of Christian Magyartdom and the threat of the ethnic or religious other. Indeed, recent scholarship on Hungarian politics has consistently demonstrated that the Orbán regime employs a [quasi-] religious ideological discourse to mobilize a right-wing base (Ádám and Bozóki 2016, 39-53).

Yet, while Orbán liberally uses Christianity as a marker of Hungarian identity, the term ‘Christianity’ is not fixed to any institution or confession of faith.⁶ Instead, like many cases of right-wing populist discourse in Europe, Christianity is invoked in relation to questions over “who we are” or “who is the authentic citizen.”⁷ In this application, national, religious, and sometimes ethnic identity are made inseparable. Thus, Christianity comes to signify exclusionary attitudes and identities, as well as the concentration of meanings secure to cultural and political hegemony. Christianity

is not defined in confessional or theological terms but rather a floating signifier for identity, belonging, and boundaries. Instead, religious tradition better encompasses a nodal point—providing both a definitive meaning connected to a phantasmic past, and moral weight to political claims.

The theoretical distinction between *religion* and *religious tradition* is introduced by Martin Riesebrodt in his 2010 work, *The Promise of Salvation*. Summarizing Riesebrodt’s theory, Genevieve Zubrzycki notes that religion is defined as a “complex of religious practices based on the premise of the existence of superhuman powers that offer the promise of salvation” (Zubrzycki 2012, 442). Conversely, religious tradition is more broadly defined by Riesebrodt as the “historical continuity of systems of symbols” (Riesebrodt 2010, xii). This distinction, while not without faults, is an important one. The latter phenomenon best captures the concern of social scientists—that is, the political and cultural dimensions of religious acts, language, and ideals. Zubrzycki writes, “If religion *can* be converted into political capital, religious tradition [or heritage]—as a set of discourses, symbols, practices, and material resources—is already thoroughly political” (Zubrzycki 2012, 443). When religion is invoked as a tradition it contributes to the process of defining “who we are,” “what is the nation,” and most importantly, “who is the other.”

Religious tradition is not merely an articulation of faith, but a means of hegemonic framing. Claims to religious tradition draw their legitimacy less from ecclesiastical texts and institutions, but more from appeals to collective memory, historic events, and the presence of a preternatural threat. Therefore, religious tradition is in part the project of claiming authenticity—for example, in the United States this is visible in the blending of Christian nationalist messaging (e.g., “America is/was a Christian nation”) with restrictive immigration policy. Tradition is key to this blended messaging as it maintains a connection between the

6 The use of Christianity in the public realm is different than the American case, as in the latter religious ascription and political identity are more intertwined. In part, this reflects a different religious culture in Hungary. Hungary can best be described as a state that has Christian pluralism (e.g., a diversity of Christian denominations, with a relatively small proportion of non-Christian groups). Orbán himself identifies as Protestant (his son is a Pentecostal preacher), yet much of the nation is Roman Catholic. The term Christianity is therefore less tied to denominational specificity – unlike some Evangelical conservatives in the United States who narrowly define the term to exclude Catholics, Mormons, etc. – and more so to nativism. For more on the history of Christianity in Hungary and the changing definitions of what it means to be a Hungarian Christian see: Paul Hanebrink, *In Defense of Christian Hungary: Religion, Nationalism, and Antisemitism, 1890–1944* (Cornell University Press, 2018).

7 Many scholars have written on how European populists employ religious identity as a means of signifying racial or national belonging (what is known as the race-religion constellation), a great example is the following work: Anya Topolski, “The Dangerous Discourse of the ‘Judaean-Christian’ Myth: Masking the Race-Religion Constellation in Europe,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 54, no. 1–2 (March 14, 2020): 71–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2019.1696049>.

present and the past. To quote Georgy Mamedov, “The vector of the reactionary quest for ‘authenticity’—or in other words, ethnic, cultural or religious purity—is always aimed at the past as a source of phantasmic unity and wholeness of an imagined community” (Mamedov 2019, 124).

Given this distinction, I believe religious tradition is more accurately representative of a nodal point in the rhetoric of Viktor Orbán and his American interlocutors. Discourses on ‘Christianity,’ the ‘Judeo-Christian tradition’ and the reclamation of the ‘Christian nation’ represent various political demands, and are conceptually attempts to maintain historical continuity. Religious tradition therefore supplies complex meaning to signifiers like ‘Christianity,’ which are missed if focus is solely given to the confessional dimensions of the term.

Analysis: Orbán’s CPAC Appearance

Before arriving at CPAC, Orbán had touted illiberal democracy as a synonym for “Christian democracy” on numerous occasions. In a 2018 speech he argued that “Christian democracy is, by definition, not liberal: it is, if you like, illiberal.”⁸ What makes a Christian democracy an illiberal one, Orbán asserted, is the prioritization of “Christian culture” instead of the liberal democratic favor of multiculturalism. In turn, a Christian democracy is one that is “anti-immigration,” critical of “adaptable family models,” and pursuant of Christian statehood.⁹

Orbán’s discourse is in line with the nativist argumentation coming from fellow European populist leaders like Geert Wilders and Marine Le Pen (See Brubaker 2017). The European populist-right has made a strategic modification to Christianity, employing the term to denote a European cultural background or ‘way of life’ rather than a belief system. This discourse is effective because it draws upon a communal or collective understanding of national, religious, and cultural tradition. It is religious tradition, as a political articulation of belonging, that the populist-right registers in their discourse, and which they use to tame/thwart pluralist religious aspirations (e.g., the practice of Islam). Orbán brought this same discourse to the American CPAC, activating fears over secularism,

Islam, and globalism. However, what is fascinating is that his discourse resonated with an American base whose socialization and collective understanding of tradition differs greatly from European civilizationist narratives.

What follows is an undertaking to unpack Orbán’s CPAC speech through the nodal point of religious tradition. This discourse strategically shapes an ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’; legitimates populist and authoritarian political programs; and defines a hegemonic struggle for the soul of western civilizations. In his August 2022 address to CPAC in Dallas, Orbán quickly established that his political ideology is grounded in the Christian religious tradition:

*“So, first and foremost: we need to trust our Judeo-Christian teachings. They help us decide what actions are right and what actions are wrong. If you believe in God, you also believe that we humans were created in God’s image. Therefore, we have to be brave enough to address even the most sensitive questions: migration, gender, and the clash of civilizations. Don’t worry: a Christian politician cannot be racist. So, we should never hesitate to heavily challenge our opponents on these issues. Be sure: Christian values protect us from going too far.”*¹⁰

His opening remarks recognized a shared identity with the CPAC audience around “Christian values” and a “trust in Judeo-Christian teachings.” This appeal to Christianity as a tradition or cultural system further oriented his populist chain of equivalence. The political climate (or social formation) is framed as a binary opposition between that which is “right”—what he claims are actions and ideals derived from Judeo-Christian teachings—and that which is “wrong”—an empty signifier articulated only in opposition to the “Judeo-Christian teachings.” Here religious tradition provides a fixed definition of the ‘self’ or collective ‘we’ that Orbán speaks to, as well as establishes hegemonic and historical continuity.¹¹

In defining the ‘self’ or ‘we,’ Judeo-Christianity is only a floating term; its true meaning is derived from an appeal to cultural and historical memory (e.g., a connection to the Christian roots of the nation). This

8 Hungarian Government, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp,” www.miniszterelnok.hu.

9 Hungarian Government, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s...”

10 Hungarian Government, “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of CPAC Texas.”

11 It is somewhat ironic that as Martin Silk (1985) noted, “Judeo-Christianity” first rose to prominence in the early 20th century in the anti-fascist critique of individuals like Father Coughlin. Nevertheless, its use in the latter half of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century has been primarily attributed to far-right and religious nationalist movements.

memory is however a powerful tool for constructing the 'self.' As Amanda Klueveld argued, the 'Judeo-Christian' tradition is neither connected to Jewish nor Christian theology, rather, in present-day Europe it is more often a discursive instrument employed in the secular search for identity (Klueveld 2016, 241-265). In a growingly multicultural Europe, this secular search for identity has found renewed vigor in the right-wing's pursuit of a sanitized and mythologized past (See Richardson and Wodak 2009).

Orbán's appeal to religious tradition is similarly a secular project of demarcating identity. Moreover, religious tradition implies an adherence to a rather secular political program, which he calls the proper (or Christian) response to, "migration, gender, and the clash of civilizations." Judeo-Christianity supplies both the impetus (or bravery) to counter liberal policies on "migration" and "gender" (it legitimates illiberal politics), the political program to remedy such "crises", and the check or restriction on his groups internal political discourse.

The first two points are obvious, but the latter deserves further attention. Just as Laclau and Mouffe argued that the populist logic of difference is a process of self-signification, Orbán employs the Judeo-Christian tradition to draw the boundaries for group belonging, ideals, and interestingly its defense. This last point is fascinating, and it illustrates how religious tradition supplies the ideological defense of populist discourse and the legitimation of illiberal and proto-authoritarian politics. Illiberalism and right-wing populism are shielded from critiques of "going too far" by their adherence to "Christian values" and the "Judeo-Christian teachings"—evident in Orbán's quip to the audience, "Don't worry: a Christian politician cannot be racist."¹² This supports Michael Toomey's finding that the manipulation of national history (and tradition!) allows Orbán to build a "shield against criticism from international and domestic actors" (Toomey 2018, 87).

Circling back to the second role of religious

tradition, Orbán's appeal to Judeo-Christianity carries a historical and, particularly in Europe, civilizational connotation.¹³ The populist and illiberal-right is justified in their political stance because they position themselves as the bulwark of defense of Christendom. This is set up in the closing statements of his Dallas address:

"And my friends, as it happens, today's progressives try to separate Western Civilization from its Christian roots once again. They are crossing a line that should never be crossed. If you separate Western Civilization from its Judeo-Christian heritage, the worst things in history happen.

*Let's be honest: the most evil things in modern history were carried out by people who hated Christianity. Don't be afraid to call your enemies by their name. You can play it safe, but they will never show mercy."*¹⁴

These remarks blend cultural memory with a 'crisis of modernity' rhetoric common to populist movements. The 'crisis of modernity' narrative comes into sharper focus through the break in historical continuity—that is, the natural and historical connection between Western Civilization and its "Christian roots."

Orbán commonly employs this narrative when speaking to Hungarian audiences. In this context, the language of religious tradition triggers the "wounded collective identity" of the Hungarian people.¹⁵ As András Bozóki suggests, Orbán's rhetoric is a prime example of this interplay between past and present in Central and Eastern European politics.¹⁶ Speaking to his Hungarian constituency, the "wounded collective identity" unites the language of religious tradition (e.g., "Christian Hungary" or "European Christendom") with the collective memory (and re-imagination) of historical moments like the 16th c. Ottoman wars. In this frame, religious tradition helps to build historical continuity between two unrelated events—seen in the linkage of the refugee crisis with the battle of Mohács in 1526, both

12 Hungarian Government, "Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of CPAC Texas."

13 For more on the connection between "Judeo-Christian" roots or tradition and the construction of European civilizational identity see works like Andrea Molle, "Religion and Right-Wing Populism in Italy: Using 'Judeo-Christian Roots' to Kill the European Union," *Religion, State and Society* 47, no. 1 (2018):151-68; and Ayhan Kaya & Ayşe Tecmen, "Europe Versus Islam?: Right-Wing Populist Discourse and the Construction of a Civilizational Identity" in *A Quarter Century of the "Clash of Civilizations,"* ed. Jeffrey Haynes (London: Routledge, 2021), 49-64.

14 Hungarian Government, "Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of CPAC Texas."

15 András Máté-Tóth's contends that the political discourse arising out of Central and Eastern European nations (CEE), may be best understood through the hermeneutical power of historical traumas and their presence in multi-generational memory (i.e., "wounded identity"), as opposed to meta-narratives like secularization (Máté-Tóth 2022, 65).

16 András Bozóki, "Occupy the State: The Orbán Regime in Hungary," *Debate: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 19, no. 3 (December 1, 2011): 649-63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965156X.2012.703415>.

framed as threats to European Christendom—and national identity, where Orbán consistently claims Hungary is the “defender of Europe.”¹⁷

However, among a largely American audience the “wounded collective identity” is not shared. Rather, in this context religious tradition operates not only as a hegemonic nodal point, but as an interpretive bridge for the two respective groups. While the American interlocutors cannot draw meaning from references to Mohács, let alone locate it on a map, they can identify with the language of securitization. Vibeke Schou Tjalve argued that the ‘Judeo-Christian’ imaginary has become a historical “meeting ground” for conservative radicals on each side of the Atlantic (Tjalve 2021, 332). This discursive meeting ground brings together traditions of American and European conservatism—each carrying different historical legacies and memories, as well as complex interpretations of Judeo-Christianity as a geo-political alternative to liberalism.

The movements between “Orbánland” and the American “Heartland” are joined by their shared imaginary of a sacred, ethno-religious civilization, and by their language of religious securitization (e.g., defending “Christian values” or the “Christian homeland”).¹⁸ While the two movements may dream of different pasts, Orbán has effectively tapped into Christian traditionalism in such a manner that the American right may understand his Hungarian experience and perspective as their own—that is, as a battle with a corrupt liberal elite, a nostalgia for bygone glory, and a critique of threatening progressive politics.

If, for any Americans reading this, the nostalgia of “Orbánland” sounds familiar, that is because it is akin to the “lost cause” myth which has plagued American political thought since the late 19th century. Certainly, Orbán’s rhetoric of defending “Christian values” and making Hungary great again resonates with the recent rearticulations of the lost cause myth in American conservative politics. Originally the lost cause was a

negationist myth defending the heroism of the confederacy, however, today it persists in attacks on LGBTQ rights, the history of American slavery, and religious pluralism. Like Orbán’s political program, some American conservatives couch restorative and nationalist politics in their “defense” against liberal hegemony and un-American pedagogy.¹⁹

The American right has identified Orbán’s illiberal democracy as the answer to threats like empty modernist standardization, secularism, and the project of liberal remembrance. In this context, Hungary and its respective history is presented as a proxy or parallel to the American experience through a shared “illiberal memory” (Rosenfeld 2021). This illiberal memory is a “protectionist reaction against the globalization of liberal remembrance,” or the liberal impulse towards national self-critique and a self-critical memory (Rosenfeld 2021). Orbán’s illiberal remembrance rejects guilt, normalizes the historical shortfalls of the nation, and claims victimhood by the present liberal order. Likewise, American conservatives have fashioned an unapologetic political discourse.²⁰ At the basis of this “illiberal memory” is a restorative Christian nationalism that defiantly justifies illiberal politics as a defense of Christian values and traditions.

Orbán constructs this shared experience at multiple points in his CPAC Texas speech, notably sounding like a weathered and tested crusader addressing a civilization on the brink of their first [culture] war:

“I am here to tell you that we should share our experiences. I am here to tell you that our values: the nation, Christian roots and family can be successful in the political battlefield. Even nowadays, when political life is ruled by liberal hegemony. I am here to tell you how we made these values successful and mainstream in Hungary! Perhaps our story can help you Keep America Great!”²¹

17 “Viktor Orbán, Defender Of Europe’ – Swiss Weekly’s Interview With Hungarian Leader In Full,” *Hungary Today* (blog), November 13, 2015, <https://hungarytoday.hu/viktor-orban-defender-europe-swiss-weeklys-interview-hungarian-leader-full-50008/>.

18 Tjalve (2021) used the terms “Orbánland” and “Heartland” to juxtapose the right-wing populist movements in Hungary and rural America.

19 This is most recently visible in Gov. Ron DeSantis’ attacks on African American studies and LGBTQ history in Florida. For an example see: Andrew Atterbury, “DeSantis Defends Banning African American Studies Course as Black Leaders Call for Action,” *POLITICO*, January 24, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/01/23/desantis-banning-african-american-studies-00079027>.

20 See: Mel Leonor, “Trump Proclaims ‘we Are Not Going to Apologize for America,’” *POLITICO*, accessed September 19, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/05/25/trump-no-apologies-america-608713>; Jamiles Lartey, “Tucker Carlson Refuses to Apologize after Sexist Remarks Resurface,” *The Guardian*, March 11, 2019, sec. Media, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/mar/11/tucker-carlson-fox-news-sexist-comments-remarks-no-apology>.

21 “Hungarian Government, “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of CPAC Texas.

Again, “Christian roots” is the nodal point for shared experience, where both “values” and the “nation” are floated without concrete definition, but are understood through the conceptual “battlefield” between *religious tradition* and “liberal hegemony” that the American and Hungarian right can respectively interpret. Additionally, “our” Hungarian story is presented as the key to keeping “America Great”—this an example of the discursive blending of Orbán’s “wounded collective identity” with American populist discourse. Despite not sharing the ‘wounded past’ and historical traumas, Orbán can effectively speak to the “persecution complex” that has become so prevalent within American conservative evangelical discourse.²² This ‘myth’ of persecution is centered around the perception of an ethno-religious threat and secular decline, driving restorative-nostalgic politics for a bygone era of white Christian cultural dominance.

Hungary’s ‘illiberal democracy’ has become a blueprint for reclaiming cultural dominance and political hegemony, even if the Hungarian context and political situation cannot be so easily transposed onto the American landscape. This is evidenced by recent visits to, and collaborations with, the Orbán regime by American conservative commentators and officials. Prior to Orbán’s CPAC appearance in Dallas, American conservative commentators even wrestled with, and rationalized, his racialized discourse through the prism of the “wounded collective identity” (though by no means in an academic sense) and religious tradition.

Defending a controversial statement made by Orbán in Transylvania, in which he condemned the prospect of a “mixed-race” Central European society, conservative filmmaker Rod Dreher justified Orbán’s reprehensible discourse as a rational response to centuries of “Muslim occupation.”²³ Dreher adopts the language of religious securitization that has become prominent in CEE political discourse to (I) justify Orbán’s fear of Muslim migration and integration, and (II) call upon Christians in the west to heed the threat of religious pluralism. To

the latter point, Dreher laments the American “cultural relativists” who have let the religious tradition (what he calls “cultural hegemony”) of the nation succumb to “woke capitalism” and “US government forces.”²⁴ More importantly, Dreher concludes that Hungary’s illiberal-democratic project has “long-term civilizational consequences” for the whole of the Christian-West, setting the stage for a transatlantic conservative movement.²⁴

This discourse was similarly on-stage at the CPAC convention in Budapest, and the Texas convention that shortly followed. CPAC chairman Matt Schlapp opened the Budapest convention proclaiming that American conservatives were moved to visit Hungary because the nation was a great example of “autonomy” and “freedom” in a globalized world.²⁶ Schlapp extolled a reverence for religious tradition as the critical juncture between American and Hungarian conservatives. Speaking on why American conservatives were choosing to look east towards Hungary for political inspiration, Schlapp proclaimed:

“America is a wonderful country, almost 250 years of leading on this question of freedom. America was founded with the understanding that God had a special plan. Not only for our country, but for each American. And it is true that, that spirit we have created, we have sometimes broken that spirit... And I want you to know that sometimes in America we elect people that are more deserving of this spirit, and sometimes we elect people that are less deserving... It is a strange thing that when we elect people from the right, they think you should do as you wish, and they respect the people of Hungary! When we elect people from the left, they want to tell you what to do. They want to tell you what to think. And I don’t know if they would have liked all those prayers that started off our proceedings today. I can understand now some of the hostility as they embrace secularism. And they try to change our history to not have a history of a people who believe in a creator.”²⁷

22 For more on the role of a persecution complex in American Protestant Christianity, see: Elizabeth A. Castelli, “Persecution Complexes: Identity Politics and the ‘War on Christians,’” *Differences* 18, no. 3 (December 1, 2007): 152–80, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2007-014>; Alan Noble, “Why Do Evangelicals Have a Persecution Complex?,” *The Atlantic*, August 4, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/08/the-evangelical-persecution-complex/375506/>.

23 Rod Dreher, “Orbán & ‘Defending The Indefensible,’” *The American Conservative*, July 30, 2022, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/orban-defending-the-indefensible/>.

24 Dreher, “Orbán & ‘Defending The Indefensible.’”

25 *Ibidem*.

26 Brooke Bezdek, “CPAC Chairman Matt Schlapp’s Opening Remarks from CPAC Hungary;,” CPAC, May 19, 2022, <https://www.conservative.org/2022/05/19/matt-schlapps-opening-remarks-cpac-hungary/>.

27 *Ibidem*.

Like Orbán, Schlapp's address follows a paradigmatic populist chain of equivalence. Empty signifiers that distinguish the 'we' from 'them' are laid out in electoral terms— "the right" and "the left." These signifiers are further engaged (and differentiated) in the battle over a floating signifier: "freedom." However, "freedom" is not the primary message; rather, a closer look at Schlapp's opening remarks reveals a more concrete difference being established between a religious-right and a secular-left. Religious tradition, seen here in statements like "*And they try to change our history to not have a history of a people who believe in a creator,*" reframes a conventionally liberal-democratic 'rights-based' discourse into an illiberal dog-whistle for ethnic and religious nationalism. This reframing of rights-based discourse has long been a tool of American conservative messaging, particularly on issues of abortion and anti-LGBTQ legislation (Lewis 2017). Still, Schlapp critiques the "liberal memory" and frames the 'other' (e.g., the secular left) as a threat to American freedom and democracy precisely because they reject the religious tradition of the nation.

In addition to Schlapp's address, the praise directed towards Orbán by figures on the American-right further demonstrates how the discourse and 'defense' of religious tradition legitimates Hungary's illiberal democracy within American circles. In 2019, then President Donald Trump lauded Orbán's leadership on thwarting immigration into Central Europe, telling him "You [Orbán] have been great with respect to Christian communities," adding, "You have really put a block up, and we appreciate that very much."²⁸ When pointedly asked about democratic "backsliding" in Hungary, Trump reinforced a discourse of religious securitization by calling the Hungarian PM "tough."²⁹

Conclusion: Strange Bedfellows? The Marriage of Central European and American Conservatives

If religious tradition is a nodal point of Orbán's discourse on illiberal democracy, then what are the political implications of his CPAC speech? Orbán regularly draws upon the securitization and protection of Christian values and Christian nationhood to highlight conservative policies on issues like immigration

(lauding his country's success in building a "physical" and "financial" wall protecting Hungarian families), and the rejection of gender inclusivity (proclaiming the Hungarian people said, "no to gender or anything!").³⁰ Floating signifiers like "progressive way of parenting," "Communist trick," and "Gender Ideology" constitute a broader ambiguous threat: 'liberal democracy.'³¹ The remedy to such a threat is the construction and maintenance of an alternative political society, one that is grounded in the rejection of these liberal democratic threats—e.g., illiberal democracy. However, rather than framing this as 'illiberalism' v. 'liberalism,' Orbán justifies the rejection of modern liberal democratic principles through the defense of religious tradition. Often noted simply as 'culture,' religious tradition justifies an incompatibility between Hungary and progressivism, liberalism, and Western hegemony. Additionally, it grounds the empty signifier of 'we'—Christian culture is therefore what protects Hungarians, families (in the heteronormative understanding), and the community.

A similar discourse is prevalent among the American right. Policies limiting LGBTQ rights (like DeSantis' 'Don't say Gay' bill) and curtailing immigration are justified through a defense of Christian America. Like with Orbán, the nodal point is not religion, but instead a hegemonic framing of religious normativity, tradition, and authenticity. While an embrace of illiberalism may have drawn the ire of both sides of the American electorate some 25 years ago, it has made its way into the discourse and politics of the American right-wing through the defense of religious tradition. Orbán's CPAC speech signals that illiberalism is no longer fringe, but now mainstream within American political discourse.

The Hungarian Prime Minister's CPAC address demonstrated that illiberalism is grounded in the securitization of religious tradition, thus justifying repressive social policies, hardline responses to immigration, and the restrictive definition of national belonging in terms of religious identity.³² This plays in his own country through a "wounded collective identity" that operationalizes the politics of fear against the foreign other, supranational institutions (like the EU), and liberal hegemony (which stresses multi-

28 Shane Goldmacher, "Trump Endorses Viktor Orbán, Hungary's Far-Right Prime Minister," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2022, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/03/us/politics/trump-endorses-viktor-orban-hungary.html>.

29 Ibidem.

30 Hungarian Government, "Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the Opening of CPAC Texas."

31 Hungarian Government, "Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán..."

32 In his CPAC address Orbán lauded his country's ability to rewrite the constitution in such a way that the "Hungarian state institutions are obliged to protect the Christian culture of Hungary."

culturalism over traditionalism). Although America lacks a similar “wounded collective identity,” the appeal to Christian traditionalism is an interpretive bridge between the Hungarian leader and his American

counterparts. Charges against secularism, liberal hegemony, and the threat of the other, resonate with a conservative movement that operationalizes the fear of losing hegemonic control.

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