



St. Petersburg State University
1/3 Smolny St., St. Petersburg, Russian Federation, 191060
ivangzz.ced@gmail.com

Religious Extremism: The Use of Western Christianity as an Element of White Supremacism

Abstract. The murder of the German politician Walter Lübcke in 2019 by a far-right extremist with links to Neo-Nazi groups exposes the need to address European ethno-nationalist extremism from a wider array of approaches, one of them, the religious one. European ethno-nationalists have found profitable the distortion of elements of Western Christianity and its use to reject individuals they consider undesirable, especially

Muslims and non-European immigrants. By doing this, far-right extremists have managed to consolidate an ideological basis known as *Christianism*. This work examines the characteristics of the extremist ideology *Christianism* and its relation to white supremacism, as well as the historical bias of the Crusades they use and that is a central part of their ideology. This work analyses the manifesto written by white supremacist terrorist Brenton Tarrant with the aim to expose the relation between white supremacism and *Christianism*, as well as the influence on terrorist acts against non-Europeans in the West, and the main propositions of such extremist ideology. The conclusion proposes the need of better education in history and critical thinking skills in societies affected by white supremacism, as well as the participation of followers of traditional Christianity in counter extremism efforts.

Key words: Christianity, Islamism, white supremacy, Crusades, the Great Replacement

Хоэл Иван Гонсалес Седилло

Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет
ул. Смольного, 1/3, Санкт-Петербург, Российская Федерация, 191060
ivangzz.ced@gmail.com

Религиозный экстремизм: использование западного христианства как элемент белого супремасизма

Аннотация. Убийство немецкого политика Вальтера Любке в 2019 году ультраправым экстремистом, имеющим связи с неонацистскими группами, обнажает необходимость противодействия европейскому этно-националистическому экстремизму с более широкого спектра подходов, один из которых – религиозный. Европейские этнонационалисты сочли выгодным искажение элементов западного христианства и его использование для отвержения людей, которых они считают нежелательными, особенно мусульман и неевропейских иммигрантов. Тем самым ультраправым экстремистам удалось консолидировать идеологическую основу, известную как *христианизм*. В данной статье рассматриваются особенности экстремистской идеологии *христианизма* и его связь с белым супремасизмом, а также исторический уклон крестовых походов, которые они используют, что это является центральной частью их идеологии. В этой работе анализируется манифест, написанный белым супремасистом и террористом Брентоном Таррантом с целью раскрытия связи между белым супремасизмом и *христианизмом*, а также влияния террористических актов против неевропейцев на Западе и основных положений этой экстремистской идеологии. В заключении говорится о необходимости повышения уровня образованности в области истории и развития навыков критического мышления в сообществах, где распространена идеология белого супремасизма, а также участия последователей традиционного христианства в борьбе с экстремизмом.

Ключевые слова: христианизм, исламизм, белый супремасизм, крестовые походы, Великая Замена

The refugee crisis of 2015 that hit European shores helped feed the rhetoric of an invasion of Europe that popularized the conspiracy theory known as “The Great Replacement”. This theory proposes people of European ethnicity are superior to other ethnic groups, but under the threat of extinction by a sponsored mass immigration of non-Europeans, especially non-Christians, into the continent. In this regard, this work will contribute with a content analysis of B. Tarrant’s manifesto “The Great Replacement” to the study of political and religious extremism in the still under-researched topic on the use of Western Christianity as an ideology by white supremacists. This extremist ideology, known as *Christianism*, should not be confused with actual Christianity, to understand this difference, existing literature and journalist reports on white supremacism and the use of *Christianism* as a political ideology is analyzed. This work will give clarity to understanding how the existence of a discourse that uses Western Christianity or elements of it as the core of white supremacy suggests there is a gap in the education system of the societies affected by this ideology.

Hannah Strømmen worked on the issue of Christianity being used as the source of far-right violent extremism. Strømmen examined how the Bible served Anders Breivik’s interests to write his manifesto and inspired him to commit the terrorist attacks of 2011 in Norway, to wage “war against Muslims and multiculturalism” [Strømmen, 2017, 148]. Strømmen identified that for Breivik “God is not a pacifist, the Bible encourages violence as self-defense of the Christian God and his seemingly exclusive European people; additionally, proponents of an anti-multiculturalist and anti-Muslim position are effectively soldiers of Christ” [Strømmen, 2017, 155]. This work adds to Strømmen’s analysis the latest data on the use of Christianity to commit acts of violent extremism.

Western Christianity

at the core of an imagined “All European” aggressive identity

Western Christianity is the set of denominations and sects that emanate from Protestantism and Catholicism, dominant in the European and American continents, for which it is seen as the central part of a Western identity. This perception is conflictive for Western evolving societies as based on it, everything that is not Christian is then non-Westerner or non-European, thus, must be rejected. To European and American far-right groups and individuals, nation and thus, the national identity is strictly linked to ethnicity and so it cannot be changed or altered. This perception is inspired in the German term “*Völkisch*”, which highlights the importance of ethnicity in understanding, consolidating and promoting the nation [Karlsson, 2009, 2].

White supremacism claims “Caucasians who have no affiliation to the Jewish faith, known as the Aryan race, make up the elite of all races while other races are considered inferior” [Wong et al., 2015, 41]. Supporters of this ideology fiercely oppose welcoming in European, North American, Australian or New Zealand (the West) land anyone who is not Christian and ethnic European.

Ideologues of white supremacism use Western Christianity as an identitarian argument to justify such rejection of the other, based on the interpretation of historical events like Medieval wars between Christian kingdoms and principalities and Islamic caliphates, and call their followers to actively stop “the Islamization of the West”. They have hijacked symbols of Western Christianity they think represent a link to a Medieval Europe that was only Catholic or Protestant and free from non-Europeans, which has been debunked by historians. They claim the Crusades were merely religious wars between Christians and Muslims, which is a topic of heated discussions as some analysts like M. Vera, propose they were indeed confrontations for the superiority of a religious liberating *Truth* (superiority of Christianity over Islam) [Ramos, 2008, 253–254], while others like C. Tyerman, consider these wars were merely to gain control of territories lost by European Christian princes and kings to the Islamic Caliphate, and vice versa, as well as geopolitical alliances.

The term *Christianist* has been used by a few journalist sources to describe individuals who use Western Christianity as an ideology for political gains and power. *Christianists* are fundamentalist Western Christians that become such extremists when they exteriorize their religious views and work to impose them on others by coercive means [Baker, 2018, 193]. According to J. Baker some of the characteristics of the *Christianist*

ideology are the participation in “paramilitary groups that train for the inevitable race war. Although, all non-whites are despised, Jews are given special place and believed to be literal offspring of Satan”, they also “perceive themselves as being in a cosmic war with “dictatorial secularism” and vast, powerful Jewish/Satanic conspiracies” [Baker, 2018, 193-194]. This ideology also proposes “the realignment of church and state, abolishing abortion, and aggressively punishing homosexuality” [Baker, 2018, 195]. Based on this, *Christianists* oppose the secular democratic state and work towards the establishment of theocracies in the West.

White supremacists have embraced the ideology proposed by *Christianists* (*Christianism*) as it serves their discourse by promoting political Western Christianity is the solution to the existential threat of Western civilization, under attack by uncontrolled immigration of non-Europeans and the perceived Islamization of their societies, which they believe is sponsored by Jews [Wong et al., 2015, 45]. White supremacists find in *Christianism* the “cultural” link to Europe, as Sam-Kpakra mentions, these groups (*Christianists*) “provide violent, extreme solutions to preserving a culture and race that is European” [Sam-Kpakra, 2016, 7]. White supremacism proposes “whites (Aryans) are the Israelites identified in the Old Testament, Jews are descendant of Satan, Adam and Eve are the first white people, descendants of pre-Adamic races are non-white and a race war the likes of which would be on a scale of Armageddon is forthcoming” [Sam-Kpakra, 2016, 18]. White supremacists also oppose abortion on the basis that the “white race” is already under threat of extinction. To them, the role of women is limited to procreation and education of children, and thus any social or political movement for the liberation of women is unwanted.

Christianist ideology “preaches segregation, perpetuates acts of violence on those it considers outside of the scope of its principles and kills in the name of their religion”, which contradicts the teachings of traditional *Christianity* and clearly calls for supremacy [Sam-Kpakra, 2016, 10].

The *Christianist* and white supremacist primordialist understanding of the national identity is challenged by constructivist approaches, like that of B. Anderson who proposes the nation “is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” [Andersson, 1991, 49] as individuals believe they share something in common with other individuals in the group or territory, though they will never meet all other individuals of that imagined group. Nevertheless, the perception of *Christianists* is Europe must remain ethnically “pure” and stay Protestant or Catholic, as they believe these two characteristics are what must unite them. This creates an imagined aggressive identity of which main existential purpose is to repeal “a historical enemy”.

In 2015, French writer Renaud Caumus coined the term “The Great Replacement” aimed at describing “the demographic replacement happening in France due to its mass immigration policies and low birth rates among the native French”. Caumus’ work, lacking any scientific methodology, inspired the white supremacist terrorist B. Tarrant, an Australian immigrant who in March 15, 2019 attacked the Al Noor mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand.

The Great Replacement:

***Christianist* Extremism and White Supremacism**

M. Wong, R. Frank & R. Allsup elaborated on the use of iconography, imagery, symbols and rhetoric on white supremacist websites as a technique to propagate their ideology to insiders, this work intends to add to theirs with the analysis of B. Tarrant’s manifesto titled “The Great Replacement” (title copied from Caumus’ work) [Wong et al., 2015, 46]. This is a seventy three pages document and due to the extension of it, only the content relevant to this work is used as the manifesto includes a large “questions and answers” list on topics like European and American politics, the author’s motivations and preparation, as well as a critique to capitalism and the neoliberal system.

B. Tarrant praises European colonialism on the American and Australian continents, while rejects “non-European colonialism” (immigration) of the West, uses an anti-immigrant rhetoric while being an immigrant himself, and promotes a strong ethno-nationalism that uses *Christianism* to justify a war against Muslims. These claims are similar to A. Breivik’s referring to an “Islamic imperialism” that is taking over Europe [Strømmen, 2017, 148].

He mentions there is a “white” genocide and calls all immigrants “invaders” who intend to “conquer our lands”; Muslims “Islamic slavers”, and makes references to the Crusades [11, p. 4-8]. In a segment addressing Turks he wrote “We are coming for Constantinople and we will destroy every mosque and minaret in the city. The Hagia Sophia will be free of minarets and Constantinople will be rightfully christian [sic] owned once more” [Tarrant, 2019, 37].

He claims Turkey is not European and thus, should not be part of NATO, based on what he perceives as “Europeanness” or “Aryanness” [Tarrant, 2019, 8]. B. Tarrant considers the US/NATO forces slaughtered Christians and fought on the side of Muslims in the Balkans because of the multi-ethnic composition of the US, no longer a pure Christian or “white” country [Tarrant, 2019, 9]. About the death of Ebba Akerlund in Stockholm in 2017 committed by a Jihadist, he wrote this type of acts “were attacks on my people, attacks on my culture, attacks on my faith and attacks on my soul” [Tarrant, 2019, 10]. This is a clear reference to the imagined “all European” identity he feels he has a connection to, though he is not Swedish neither of Swedish ancestry.

He wrote “The only muslim [sic] I truly hate is the convert, those from our own people that turn their backs on their heritage, turn their backs on their cultures, turn their backs on their traditions and become blood traitors to their own race.”, demonstrating his clear support of the *Völkisch* concept. [Tarrant, 2019, 15-16]. Interestingly he wrote “They are no innocent in an invasion (the innocent people he killed), all those who colonise other people’s lands share guilt” [Tarrant, 2019, 17], being an Australian of European ancestry he clearly decided to ignore he is not natural to Australia as any other European, and by his own standards, he is a colonizer and thus, oppressor of the native people of that land. Tarrant as A. Breivik, and others in the white supremacist movement, do not see Islam as another religion, but rather as a “totalitarian political ideology” that must be stopped [Strømmen, 2017, 151].

In a segment dedicated to Christians, he included two paragraphs from a speech given by Pope Urban II in France in 1095 to a crowd that was being called to join the First Crusade: “The race of the elect suffers outrageous persecutions, and the impious race of the Saracens respects neither the Virgins of the Lord nor the colleges of priests.” and “Let the fire of our repentance raise up the Holy War and the love of our brethren lead us into combat. Let our lives be stronger than death to fight against the enemies of the Christian people” [Tarrant, 2019, 35]. This is a demonstration of the *Christianist* influence on his white supremacist ideas.

Conclusions

Christianism is the ideology that uses elements of Western Christianity to achieve political goals. Unlike Christianity, *Christianism* promotes superiority of Christians over other Abrahamic religions (it is anti-Semite and anti-Islamic), usually (though not necessarily) supports European ethnocentrism, is intolerant of those who do not espouse its interpretation of Christianity and sometimes calls its followers to engage in violence and murder in the name of religion. White supremacists have appropriated *Christianism* and mixed it with distorted historical references, like the Crusades.

Tarrant’s manifesto is the clear demonstration that ignorance of the perceived basic foundations of traditional Christianity (respect, forgiveness, tolerance) and a weak knowledge of history, allows the use of Western Christianity as an ideology by promoters of white supremacy. Ignorance occupies a central role in the process of indoctrination, as white supremacists would not be able to indoctrinate their target audience if the audience were not ignorant on the issues white supremacists use. This demonstrates there might be a gap in the education system of the societies affected by white supremacism, especially in learning critical thinking skills and the teaching of universal history. This is evidenced by the acceptance of a Eurocentric and distorted or outdated approach to the Crusades that enables falling for pseudo-historical versions of these events, as well as the immigration phenomenon in Europe.

Involvement of Christian leaders, NGOs and believers in general who do not espouse the distortion of the actual message of traditional Christianity is extremely relevant to counter *Christianist* extremism. Their participation is becoming necessary to avoid the politization of their religious symbols in the search of political power, which

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