

Islamophobia in Western Europe is unrelated to religiosity but highly correlated with far right attitudes

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Kai Arzheimer

Abstract

The far right's relationship with religion has become a major focus of current research. Even in Western Europe, one of the most rapidly secularising areas of the world, far right actors claim to defend Christian values against the alleged threat of Islam and Muslim immigrants, a rhetorical strategy known as 'Christianism'. Yet, little is known about how religiosity, Islamophobia, and populist far-right ideology are connected at the level of mass belief systems in Western Europe. Most of the literature is focused either on religiosity's effect on voting or on the connection between religiosity and ethnic prejudice, without considering religiosity's relationships with the wider spectrum of far-right ideology. The present article fills this gap by analysing survey data from Britain, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. It uses SEM to uncover the relationships between Christian religiosity on the one hand and Islamophobia and far-right attitudes on the other. The results are broadly similar across different contexts: religiosity is mostly unrelated to Islamophobia, nativism, right-wing authoritarianism, and populism. Conversely, Islamophobia overlaps considerably with both nativism and authoritarianism: people who perceive immigration as a threat and favour strict laws and harsh enforcement also tend to reject Islam, but not for religious reasons. This pattern is compatible with the strategy of Christianism, which is largely devoid of religiosity, yet facilitates the "othering" of Muslims as a cultural out-group. It also helps to explain why there is no genuine, electorally relevant religious far right in Western Europe.

Keywords

Religion, Christianity, nativism, authoritarianism, radical right, far right attitudes, islamophobia, Western Europe

Introduction: religious prejudice in secular societies?

Since the 1990s, Muslims have been the most important out-group for far right¹ mobilisation in Western Europe (Betz and Meret 2009, 319–22). However, with the exception of some countries, most prominently the US, where there is an 'irreconcilable link between Christian teachings and the ... far-right' (Weinberg and Assoudeh 2016, 185), the majority of far right actors in Europe have secular, anti-clerical, or even neo-pagan roots, in one of the most rapidly secularising regions in the world (Norris and Inglehart 2011). Consistent with this, most far right voters have little interest in religion (Arzheimer 2018). Therefore, the faith of certain immigrants and their descendants *should* not be such a big issue.

And yet, from the late 1990s on, European far right parties began to address an alleged conflict between Islam and the Christian identities of Europe's autochthonous communities (Zúquete 2008). Beyond the obvious conflation of Islam and Islamism in the wake of Islamist terror attacks, one prominent explanation for this apparent paradox holds that Western European far right actors have developed a rhetorical strategy which uses Christianity

Department of Political Science, University of Mainz, Germany

Corresponding author:

Kai Arzheimer, Department of Political Science, University of Mainz, Jakob Welder-Weg 12, Mainz 55128, Germany.
Email: arzheimer@politik.uni-mainz.de



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primarily as a cultural marker that is largely devoid of religiosity, yet facilitates the ‘othering’ of Muslims as a cultural out-group (Marzouki and Donnell, 2016). In its purest form, proponents of this strategy even claim that (cultural) Christianity is the ‘matrix of liberalism, secularity, and gender equality’ (Brubaker 2017, 1212) whereas Islam is described as inherently incompatible with these values.

As a discursive strategy, such ‘Christianism’ (Brubaker 2017, 1198) serves several purposes. First, because religion and ethnicity are correlated, it enables the exclusion of ethnic groups without the need to resort to overt racism. This meshes with the nativist and ethnopluralist frames that undergird the appeal of the modern far right (Mudde 2007). Second, Christianity is flexible enough to strategically co-opt Judaism. Presenting themselves as respectable standard bearers of ‘Judeo-Christian’ values, far right actors are able to distract from their anti-semitic roots and to insulate themselves against claims of extremism whilst attacking Muslims (Hafez 2014). Third, Christianity fits well into a wider strategy of ‘illiberal invocations of liberalism’ (Brubaker 2017, 1193) aimed at singling out immigrants under the pretext of protecting democratic principles and the rights of women and sexual minorities. As such, it can be understood as part of an even broader ‘civilizational populism’ that employs transnational elements of the national culture to construct an unbridgeable divide between the ‘pure people’ and the ‘dangerous others belonging to other civilizations’ (Yilmaz and Morieson 2022, 1044).²

As a *communication strategy*, the political use of religion and Islamophobia has been rightfully critiqued as insincere and full of contradictions (Moffitt (2017); Roy (2020); Brubaker (2017), 1210; see also Moffitt (2017); Roy (2020)). However, little attention has been paid to the question of how religiosity, Islamophobia and populist far right ideology are connected, if at all, at the level of *mass belief systems* in Western Europe. Much of the existing literature is confined to the effects of religiosity on electoral support for the far right, whereas a second strand of research links religion to prejudice against immigrants and/or Muslims, but mostly without considering its relationship with more general far right attitudes.

The present article aims to close this gap by analysing a unique comparative dataset collected in the aftermath of the so-called refugee crisis of 2015/16, when the issues of religion and immigration were particularly salient and Christianity had been adopted by many (though not all) far right parties in Western Europe. It starts with briefly reviewing the concepts of religiosity, Islamophobia, and far right attitudes, followed by a discussion of the data and methods. I then present findings from four West European countries – Britain, France, Germany, and the Netherlands – which demonstrate that Islamophobia is very closely associated with nativism and overlaps with authoritarianism and populism, but is unrelated to religiosity. Religiosity is also mostly unrelated to far right attitudes. The final section discusses the implications

for politics in Western Europe and for research on the far right in this region.

Concepts: Far right attitudes, islamophobia, and religion

The current literature on the far right is dominated by Mudde’s (2007) highly influential tripartite conceptualisation of far right ideology. Although it was originally developed with reference to parties and movements, it is also useful for structuring far right attitudes at the individual level.

Its core element is *nativism*, that is, a mixture of nationalism and xenophobia which holds that non-native elements are a danger to the homogeneous nation state (Mudde 2007, 19), corresponding to individual perceptions of cultural and economic threat from non-natives (Mudde 2019, 27–28). Its second component is (right-wing) *authoritarianism*, a concept developed by Altemeyer (1981) that comprises authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism, which lead to demands for law-and-order policies, strong leadership, and subordination of out-groups (Aichholzer and Zandonella 2016). Finally, political actors often link far right ideas to demands for unrestricted popular sovereignty. Again, this ‘thin ideology’ of *populism* can be translated into micro-level beliefs in a homogeneous and virtuous people subjugated by a corrupt elite (Akkerman et al. 2014).

While these ideas and their operationalisations are now widely applied, *Islamophobia* is a more ambiguous and politically contested concept. The word was coined early in the 20th century and entered political, media, and finally scientific discourses from the 1980s on (Cesari et al., 2006, 5; Allen 2010, 1). Notwithstanding its widespread use, it has been critiqued (among other things) for ignoring the ethnic, cultural, social, and religious diversities within Muslim communities; shielding problematic institutions and practices from legitimate criticism; focusing excessively on religious identities; and obscuring more blatant forms of racism (Halliday 1999). One critic even argues that the concept should be recast as ‘Islamophobism’, because it refers to a socially ‘manufactured’ ideology and not to an ‘innate’ phobia (Kaya 2016, 286).

However, many of these conceptual problems stem from the fact that Islamophobia is ‘applied to very diverse phenomena’, lumping ‘together all kinds of different forms of discourse, speech and acts’ (Cesari et al., 2006, 6), which leads to confusion. Conversely, at the level of individual attitudes, its meaning is much clearer. Here, according to a widely accepted definition, Islamophobia refers to prejudice ‘against individuals on the basis of the [ir] religious belief in Islam’ (Imhoff and Recker 2012, 812). It is based on stereotypical views of Muslims and Islam and centred on a series of perceived threats, among which the threat of

violence and extremism and the threat to Western values and lifestyles are arguably the most prominent. Although prejudice against Muslims and their religion (Islamophobia in a strict sense or ‘Islamoprejudice’) and the secular critique of certain religious practices are often conflated for political reasons, they are conceptually and empirically separable (Imhoff and Recker 2012, 812–16). Even if there remains some residual ambiguity and overlap with related terms such as anti-Muslim racism, I will therefore stick with ‘Islamophobia’ as the most commonly used term for such attitudes in the empirical literature.

Finally, the relationships between religion – itself a multi-faceted phenomenon (Voas 2007) – on the one hand and far right beliefs and Islamophobia on the other are complex. Historically, some strands of far right ideology were anti-clerical and even anti-Christian, whereas others incorporated elements of Christian doctrine and involved the national churches (Payne 1995, 8; Minkenberg 2018). However, a clear negative relationship between religiosity and far right voting emerged in many comparative and single-country studies from the 1990s on, while the importance of religion further declined and many national churches came out in support of refugees and other immigrants.

Yet, there are important caveats. First, this negative relationship is most pronounced in systems with strong Christian democratic parties and actually reversed in some Eastern European countries (Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville 2022). Second, and more importantly, religious citizens are not necessarily less nativist, authoritarian, or populist than those who are indifferent to or unaffiliated with religion: using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) on ESS data from the early 2000s, Arzheimer and Carter (2009) show that religiosity and far right attitudes are mostly unrelated, and that the negative relationship between religiosity and far right voting is mediated by an identification with a Christian or conservative party.

This, in line with some of the seminal literature on the subject (Allport 1954, 444), suggests a link between religion and far right attitudes that is ambiguous and conditional on context. Comparative studies that focus on the relationship between religion and prejudice in Europe confirm this impression. Scheepers et al. (2002), who rely on unusually nuanced measures of religiosity, find that across 11 European countries in the 1990s, church attendance and religious particularism (the belief that there is only one true religion) were associated with higher levels of prejudice against immigrants, whereas salience of religion, individual spirituality, and doctrinal beliefs were negatively associated with prejudice. This finding was essentially replicated across 44 European countries surveyed in 2010 by the EVS (Doebler 2014). Doebler (2014) was also able to differentiate between immigrants and Muslims as targets of prejudice, but the effects she found were broadly

comparable. Similarly, Storm (2018), who analyses ESS data for the 2002–2014 period, finds that the effects of religiosity on nativism depend on the economic and cultural context.

Against this backdrop, I expect only weak associations between individual religiosity on the one hand, and Islamophobia and far right attitudes on the other (H1). Conversely, Islamophobia should be closely related to more general far right attitudes and particularly so to nativism (H2).

Country selection, data and methods

To test these hypotheses, the analysis relies on four large online surveys conducted in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the Netherlands as part of the SCoRE project (<https://www.score.uni-mainz.de/>), with respective sample sizes detailed in Table 1. The fieldwork was carried out by major companies (BVA, Infratest dimap, GfK, ICM), which recruited participants from their access panels using quotas for region, age, gender, and education.³

The four countries were selected because they are traditionally Christian but have sizable Muslim minorities, ranging from 6% (Germany) to 9% (France) of the total population (Pew Research Center 2017, 4). All four are rapidly secularising, with church-going Christians comprising only between 15% (Netherlands) and 22% (Germany) of the population (Pew Research Center 2018, 7). These countries also feature relevant far right actors. At the same time, they differ in their denominational traditions, historical, and current state-church relations, and the extent to which political actors employ ‘Christianist’ strategies. If similar correlational patterns were observed in these countries, the results should therefore generalise well to other Western European nations.

The data were collected at the tail end of the so-called refugee crisis and in the context of the respective 2017 national elections, that is, at a point when the salience of immigration and religion was high across Europe. However, there is also relevant cross-national variation in the *political appeals* by far right actors.

The strategy of Christianism was pioneered in the Netherlands and is still used by the PVV.⁴ In France, the leadership of the Front National was originally closely affiliated with an authoritarian and fundamentalist strand of Catholicism that was opposed to Islam on religious grounds and also rejected divorce, abortion, and homosexuality (Davies 2010, 578–80). Yet, as their electorate became less religious and less socially conservative from the late 1980s on (Mayer and Perrineau 1992), the party toned down their fundamentalist appeals even before Marine Le Pen took over as leader (Davies 2010, 581). Lately, the party has adopted a Christianist stance, albeit with a specific laicist twist (Cremer 2023b). Conversely, the Brexit campaign in

Table 1. Relationships among five constructs

	Germany (W)	Germany (E)	Britain	France	Netherlands
1: cov (Nativism, Populism)	0.39*** (0.01)	0.47*** (0.02)	0.22*** (0.01)	0.30*** (0.01)	0.54*** (0.01)
2: cov (Authoritarianism, Populism)	0.33*** (0.01)	0.34*** (0.02)	0.32*** (0.01)	0.26*** (0.01)	0.51*** (0.02)
3: cov (Authoritarianism, Nativism)	0.51*** (0.01)	0.52*** (0.02)	0.61*** (0.01)	0.60*** (0.01)	0.59*** (0.02)
4: cov (Religiosity, Populism)	-0.15*** (0.01)	-0.13*** (0.02)	-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.08*** (0.01)
5: cov (Religiosity, Nativism)	-0.10*** (0.01)	-0.15*** (0.02)	-0.10*** (0.02)	0.14*** (0.01)	-0.04** (0.01)
6: cov (Religiosity, Authoritarianism)	0.08*** (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	0.17*** (0.03)	0.27*** (0.01)	0.07 (0.04)
7: cov (Islamophobia, Populism)	0.38*** (0.01)	0.46*** (0.02)	0.28*** (0.01)	0.25*** (0.01)	0.46*** (0.01)
8: cov (Islamophobia, Nativism)	0.64*** (0.01)	0.68*** (0.01)	0.60*** (0.01)	0.65*** (0.01)	0.68*** (0.01)
9: cov (Islamophobia, Authoritarianism)	0.52*** (0.01)	0.52*** (0.02)	0.67*** (0.01)	0.61*** (0.01)	0.59*** (0.02)
10: cov (Islamophobia, Religiosity)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.10*** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.01)	0.18*** (0.01)	-0.02 (0.02)
N	19900	5470	23502	18733	7837
RMSEA	0.050	0.044	0.074	0.060	0.073
TLI	0.93	0.94	0.85	0.89	0.86
CFI	0.94	0.96	0.89	0.92	0.90

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Britain put their focus on leaving the European Union and was ‘much less rhetorically preoccupied with Islam than Continental national populists’ while the German AfD did not consistently ‘frame its anti-Muslimism in “liberal” [or religious] terms’ (Brubaker 2017, 1193).

The data have the advantage of providing instruments for an unusually fine-grained measurement of far right attitudes. As for *nativism*, there are four items that measure perceptions of economic and cultural threat from immigration.⁵ Three additional items tap into the aggression, submission, and conventionalism facets of *authoritarianism*, while four more items derived from Akkerman et al. (2014) measure *populist* attitudes. The data sets also replicate two of the 19 (!) items that Imhoff and Recker (2012) proposed for measuring Islamoprejudice. Finally, two items relate to the belonging and behaviour facets of religion: a sense of belonging to a mainstream Christian tradition, and frequency of church attendance.⁶

The original samples were confined to nationals of the four countries. To avoid ambiguities, the (relatively few) adherents of non-Christian religions were removed, whereas those respondents who do have no sense of belonging to *any* religious group are retained in the analysis.

Because I am interested in the *structure* of belief systems, SEM, and more specifically Confirmatory Factor Analysis

(CFA), is ideally suited to the research question at hand. This method allows for the simultaneous modelling of associations among the five constructs and their relationships with the respective items (see Figure 1).

H1 and H2 refer to the relative strength of the associations between the constructs within each country. Therefore, the weakest form of cross-national measurement equivalence, configural invariance⁷, is sufficient. Models were hence estimated separately for each country/region, giving each construct a mean of zero and a variance of one so that their covariances become correlations, which facilitates interpretation. The MLR estimator implemented in Mplus 8.2, which transparently handles missing data, was employed to produce full information parameter estimates as well as standard errors that are robust to non-normality in the indicator variables.⁸

Findings

Table 1 shows the most important results. By the usual rules of thumb, the model fit is very good in the German samples and good to acceptable in the other loadings countries. All items display substantial and significant loadings on their factors (see Online Appendix Tables 1–3).

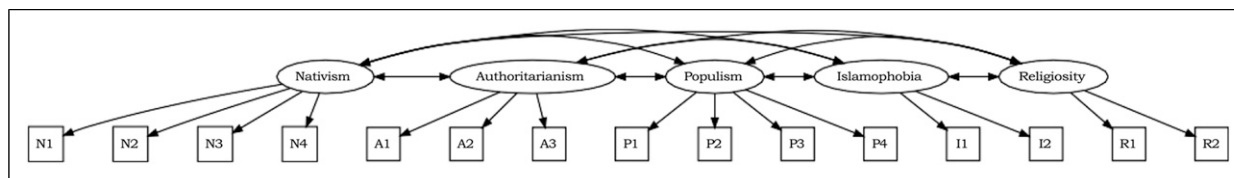


Figure 1. Model structure.

The high ($r \geq 0.60$) correlations in row 8 indicate that Islamophobia is closely related to nativism in all five samples. This chimes with the debates about the place of Islam in Western societies and the notion that nativists see ‘nonnative elements’ as threatening. Its correlations with authoritarianism (row 9) are also substantial in all countries (particularly in Britain, slightly less so in Germany), whereas its relationship with populism (row 7) is weaker and less consistent across countries.

Conversely, the correlations between Islamophobia and religiosity are all quite weak or even insignificant (row 10). Similarly, rows 4–6 indicate that religion is also largely disconnected from the three components of far right ideology. Its single strongest relationship of $r = 0.27$ is with authoritarianism in France.⁹

Finally, the correlations between nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (rows 1–3) are all positive. The link between nativism and authoritarianism is rather strong in most countries but a bit more muted in Germany, while the correlations between nativism and populism and between authoritarianism and populism are again less consistent, but still clearly positive, and rather strong in the Netherlands.¹⁰

In essence, the same *general pattern of relationships* holds across the four different countries: In line with H1 and H2, personal religiosity is virtually unrelated to both Islamophobia and to far right attitudes, while Islamophobia is strongly correlated with both nativism and authoritarianism.

Conclusion and outlook

While there is already a large body of literature on the sources of prejudice against Muslims (Islamophobia) in Western Europe, mine is, to the best of my knowledge, the first contribution that aims to disentangle the micro-level relationships between Christian religiosity, Islamophobia, and far right attitudes in their tripartite conceptualisation. Across five samples, the empirical pattern of correlations aligns with the hypotheses: religiosity is unrelated to both Islamophobia and far right attitudes while Islamophobia is closely intertwined with nativism and authoritarianism.

This result speaks, first, to the literature on religion and tolerance, as there is no evidence of the religious bigotry that

Allport linked to an ‘extrinsic’ view of religion (Allport and Ross, 1967; Altemeyer, 1981). In the West European context, this makes perfect sense: regular church attendance or even church membership is no longer a universal norm in this region and therefore no longer serves as an indicator of ‘conformity’ (Storm 2018). At the same time, and consistent with previous findings (Arzheimer and Carter (2009); Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville (2022)), there is also very little evidence of the ‘sublimity of religious ideals’ (Allport 1954, 444): on average, religious citizens are just as likely to be nativist or Islamophobic as their indifferent or irreligious compatriots.

Second, as a complement to the literature on far right discourses and strategies, this micro-level pattern also helps to explain why there is no genuine, electorally relevant religious far right at the organisational and ideological levels in Western Europe. Unlike in the US, where certain strands of (White Christian) religiosity are closely linked to racism (Walker and Haider-Markel 2024) and hostility towards immigrants and Muslims (Sherkat and Derek, 2018), it lacks an attitudinal base in this region. Conversely, the West European pattern is compatible with a strategy that uses Christianity as a convenient cultural marker to exclude Muslims. Religion is cherished by right-wingers ‘just as long as it does not interfere with their daily life, lecture them on loving their neighbour or preach to them about ethics and values’ (Roy 2020, 125).

Such Christianity is attractive to far right actors who strive for respectability, because overt racism is much more stigmatised than (empirically closely related) beliefs in the superiority of one’s culture (Bratt 2022). However, whether Christianity’s appeal to voters is greater than that of related ‘illiberal invocations of liberalism’ (Brubaker 2017, 1193) or more traditional strands of nativism – and whether Christianity remains feasible in an increasingly secular environment where religious leaders often turn against the far right (Cremer, 2023a) – are different questions. Future research should address these using experimental methods. Recent work on the psychology of ‘homonationalist’ messages (Turnbull-Dugarte and Ortega, 2024) demonstrates that these techniques hold great promise for the field.

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Ethical statement

Ethical approval

The fieldwork was carried out by professional polling companies according to national data protection laws and in line with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation. All data were fully anonymised before they were delivered to the SCoRE team.

Informed consent

Participants were recruited from commercial online access panels and opted into this specific survey.

ORCID iD

Kai Arzheimer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9073-3205>

Data Availability Statement

Replication data, scripts, and documentation are available from the journals dataverse: 10.7910/DVN/IZK5SF

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

The replication files are available at: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/IZK5SF>

Notes

1. Following [Mudde \(2019\)](#), I use 'far right' as a shorthand for ideas and organisations that are at odds with liberal democracy. This includes the openly anti-democratic extreme right, the radical right, which attacks the liberal elements of democracy (e.g. deliberative institutions and minority protections), and radicalised mainstream actors, who co-opt elements of the radical right.
2. Somewhat ironically, 'civilizational populism' is also common in a host of non-western and even non-Christian countries ([Yilmaz and Morieson 2022](#)).

3. The German survey frame oversampled respondents from Germany's eastern states, that is, the territory of the former GDR. At $n = 5,470$, the eastern sub-sample is sufficiently large to analyse these data separately, offering some additional contextual variation because the eastern shares of Christians, immigrants, and Muslims are all markedly lower than in the West while nativism is more prevalent.
4. The Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (SGP) is a genuinely religious/Protestant far right party but plays only a marginal role in Dutch politics.
5. While economic and cultural perceptions are analytically distinct, they are conceptually related and often align closely in empirical data. A series of preliminary measurement models on the five samples does indeed yield high correlations of $r \geq 0.85$ between both sub-dimensions. In the spirit of parsimony and to avoid convergence problems that could result from having highly intercorrelated constructs with few indicators, nativism is treated as unidimensional.
6. For Germany, a second item for the behaviour facet as well as an item for the belief facet are available. Including these in the model does not substantially alter the results.
7. Configural invariance means that the model structure depicted in [Figure 1](#) holds in each sample. If one wanted to compare individual factor scores across countries, higher levels of invariance (metric and scalar) would be required. In the present case, metric invariance can be ruled out a priori, because the German questionnaire used a 7-point-scale for the populism questions (to bring it in line with the other items in the survey) whereas the Dutch, English, and French questionnaires used a 5-point-scale (to exactly replicate the format used by [Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove](#)).
8. See the [Online Appendix](#) for details on the estimation.
9. The older literature (e.g. [Allport and Ross, 1967](#)) often found a *curvilinear* relationship between church attendance and prejudice that could present as a weak *linear* correlation. To safeguard against this possibility, I plotted the estimated factor scores for nativism, authoritarianism, populism, and Islamophobia against the factor scores for religiosity and applied a LOWESS smoother (see [Online Appendix Figure 1](#)). Apart from some artifacts at the margins of the distribution, the resulting lines are mostly straight and flat, suggesting that the lack of association has nothing to do with a curvilinear pattern.
10. While some of the cross-country differences appear interesting, individual parameter estimates should not be compared across countries under configural invariance (see note 7).

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