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**Populism and Religion:
Freedom of Self-Expression, State, modernity ◊**

*Populismo e religione:
Libertà di autoespressione, politica, modernità, caratteristiche procedurali◊*

ABSTRACT: L'articolo è dedicato al tema del populismo nella religione in condizioni moderne. L'articolo spiega la correlazione tra libertà di espressione e populismo. Gli autori considerano il fenomeno del populismo sotto vari aspetti, tra cui: il populismo come strumento di politicizzazione di un'organizzazione religiosa, il populismo come componente latente di una politica interna sacralizzata (anche se esteriormente neutrale). Per molti secoli, i regimi al potere di vari Stati hanno cercato e tentato di mettere la Chiesa al servizio dei loro interessi politici, cercando di usare le chiese nei loro giochi di politica interna e persino estera, tentando di manipolare le identità religiose e di impegnarsi in una "costruzione di chiese" artificiale, per trasformare le chiese in comodi strumenti ideologici al servizio del potere - tutto questo è stato un'ibridazione di populismo politico e populismo religioso su misura. Ma in queste condizioni, il populismo religioso è sempre un'imposizione forzata di tendenze distruttive per la Chiesa, è sempre una profanazione del religioso, la distruzione delle basi più fondamentali della religione. Ma allo stesso modo, la Chiesa deve essere protetta dall'altra parte, dai tentativi populisti di violare il corpus di valori della Chiesa, le reliquie e i nomi onorati dalla retorica della libertà di espressione. Gli autori concludono che il populismo (come strumento socio-giuridico, basato sul paradigma del populismo) dovrebbe essere usato con molta attenzione - nella sfera della religione in uno Stato laico.

ABSTRACT: The article is devoted to the topic of populism in religion in modern conditions. The article explains the correlation between freedom of expression and populism. The authors consider the phenomenon of populism in various aspects, including: populism as an instrument of politicization of a religious organization, populism as a latent component of internally sacralized (though outwardly neutral) politics. For many centuries, the ruling regimes of various states have sought and tried to put the Church at the service of their political interests, trying to use the churches in their own domestic and even foreign policy games, related attempts to manipulate religious identities and engage in artificial "church-building", to turn churches into handy ideological tools in the service of power - all this was a hybridization of political populism

and religious populism tailored to it. But under such conditions, religious populism is always a forced imposition of tendencies destructive to the Church, it is always a profanation of the religious, the destruction of the most fundamental foundations of religion. But equally, the Church must be protected on the other side - from populist attempts to infringe on the Church's corpus of values, on relics and names honored by the rhetoric of freedom of expression. The authors conclude that populism (as a socio-legal tool, which is based on the paradigm of populism) should be used very cautiously - in the sphere of religion in a secular state.

1 - Introduction

The topic of populism in the context of religion is as relevant as it is poorly researched. And the actualization of this topic is only growing in the context of social tectonic changes in the modern world.

As Andy Knott wrote,

"populism might just be the political phenomenon of the twenty-first century. It certainly feels that way as its second decade draws to a close. There have been two key features related to populism in recent years. First off, populism is the buzzword; all of a sudden, whether they be politicians, journalists, academics, everyone's talking about it, and it's even filtered down to be a recognised term among the wider public beyond those chattering classes. And this talk about populism is, of course, directly related to the explosion, growth and consolidation of political administrations, regimes, parties and movements that have appeared in the new millennium and been designated as populist. Alongside this populist eruption and zeitgeist, curiosity about what populism actually is has been the second distinctive feature. When asked to pin down what it actually is or means, the response is either to shrug shoulders and admit defeat or to confidently assert a definition. The problem with this second approach is that all too often one confident definition differs markedly from the next. Both of these options - no definition or multiple competing ones - lead to confusion. And when put together, these two key features are dissatisfying. When there's as widespread a political phenomenon as populism, yet there's no

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clear guide on how to get a handle on it, we're left in a perplexing situation"[1].

Today, according to Rogelio Demarchi, those who study contemporary politics are relatively forced to take a certain position in relation to the concept of populism as it has become omnipresent. Abundant bibliography published in this area over the last few years demonstrates that a significant part of the academic community has given this issue a lot of consideration[2].

A cohort of articles in scientific magazines, monographs and theses have accumulated by this day (Ernesto Laclau, Peter R. Sinclair, Loris Zanatta, Jose Pedro Zúquete, Andy Knott, Nadia Urbinati, Olivier Roy, Rogers Brubaker, Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, Roger Brubaker, Daniel Nilsson DeHanas, Benjamin Moffitt, Gordon Lynch, Cas Mudde, Werner Wirth, Frank Esser, Martin Wettstein, Ben Stanley Cas Mudde, Werner Wirth, Frank Esser, Martin Wettstein, Ben Stanley, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, Pierre Ostiguy, Ionuţ Apahideanu, et al.) in different languages (just in Latin- and Cyrillic-based languages) devoted to the topic of populism or addressing it in any significant way has become a colossal mass, which would take a few lifetimes of a scholar to just skim through.

Making our way through the thicket of the most intricate, or, instead, common and hackneyed (repeated over and over again) interpretations of the concept of "populism", one cannot help but come to the conclusion that the real meaning of this concept is attractively close to the interpretation provided by Emmy Eklundh and Andy Knott: our understanding of populism is as a form and not as possessing any readily identifiable content[3]. As well as Loris Zanatta, who wrote that populism is a kind of phoenix bird of whom they talk so much, but do so with elusive characteristics who has some attributes recurrent in time and space which render him a certain resemblance to ideology. Or, even better, a "mindset", as inaccurate as it is deep-rooted[4].

The questions of populism stemming from an interdisciplinary-based approach are of significant interest. One of such questions is the question of populism in relation to the field of religion. This is truly a field upon which many swords of heated discussions have been and will be crossed.

It has to be noted that this agenda is more closely related to the professional scope of interest of sociologists than that of scholars of law,

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[1] **A. KNOT,** *Populism. The Politics of a Definition, The Populist Manifesto,* ed. by E. EKLUNDH and A. KNOTT, Rowman & Littlefield, 2020, London, p. 9.
[2] **R. DEMARCHI,** *La relación entre populismo y religión salta a la vista,* (*https://www.lavoz.com.ar/ciudad-equis/la-relacion-entre-populismo-y-religion-salta-la-vista/,* 10 de Julio 2014).
[3] **E. EKLUNDH, A. KNOT,** *Introduction, The Populist Manifesto,* ed. by E. EKLUNDH and A. KNOTT,: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020, London, p. 2.
[4] Quoted by: **R. DEMARCHI,** *La relación,* cit.

to whom the authors of this publication belong, yet it reaches over to the interdisciplinary areas that have significant appeal to lawyers as well.

It is therefore a topic that covers a huge area of voids (void - cavity) - areas of intellectual cavities between islets of clarified aspects of substance.

2 - Populism. General concept, characteristic features, ontology

2.1 - The concept of populism

The term "populism" was created in the US in late 19th century to denote both a language of politics and a form of political engagement, characteristic of democratic processes and compatible therewith[5].

As Ernesto Laclau wrote,

"populism, as a category of political analysis, confronts us with rather idiosyncratic problems. On the one hand it is a recurrent notion, one which is not only in widespread use - being part of the description of a large variety of political movements - but also one which tries to capture something about the latter which is quite central. Midway between the descriptive and the normative, 'populism' intends to grasp something crucially significant about the political and ideological realities to which it refers. The apparent vagueness of the concept is not translated into any doubt concerning the importance of its attributive function. We are far from clear, however, about the content of that attribution. A persistent feature of the literature on populism is its reluctance - or difficulty - in giving the concept any precise meaning. Notional clarity - let alone definition - is conspicuously absent from this domain. Most of the time, conceptual apprehension is replaced by appeals to a non-verbalized intuition, or by descriptive enumerations of a variety of 'relevant features' - a relevance which is undermined, in the very gesture which asserts it, by reference to a proliferation of exceptions"[6].

Scientific literature provides a vast number of multiple diverse approaches to defining the concept of populism, its specific features, substantial characteristics and variations.

Let us review some of them.

2.2 - Populism as a concept

Peter Sinclair believes that the concept of populism is one of the most difficult to define in political sociology as it is applied simultaneously to describe most diverse cases, routinely including a great number of

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[5] **N. URBINATI**, *Democracy and Populism*, in *Constellations*, 1998, Vol. 5, no. 1, p. 110.
[6] **E. LACLAU**, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, London, 2005, p. 3.

political movements, developed across various continents without mutual influence, as well as across various time periods[7].

From the point of view of political communication, populism may be understood as a set of characteristic features that stem from the objectives, motives and attitudes of political actors, mass media and the general public (or resonates with such objectives, motives and attitudes)[8].

According to Nadia Urbinati, populism implies a limitless superiority of the "will of the people" over institutions and social strata that do not identify themselves with the dominant category of the population[9].

Populist movements are usually called so by the subjects outside them and judging them from without. Moreover, this term has been overused to "label" political opponents rather than for the sake of comparison and understanding political movements[10].

The term "populism" is often used as a negative epithet to undermine political opponents. Such stigma, however, being characteristic of populism, is, in and of itself, indicative of the fact that populism exists as a standalone pattern of ideas[11].

On the whole, one can note that, despite the criticism against populism, this notion is multifaceted and multidimensional enough and should not be viewed solely from the point of view of its shortcomings.

2.3 - Populism as ideology

An aspect of great interest is the discussion in the scientific community regarding the possibility of referring populism to ideologies, and to what extent it can be done.

Cas Mudde, for example, defines populism as an ideology within the framework of which society is considered to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people[12].

On the other hand, Werner Wirth, Frank Esser, Martin Wettstein, et al. view populism in two aspects: as a 'thin' ideology' and as a 'full' ideology'. Populism as a 'thin' ideology refers to a rather narrow set of

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[7] **P.R. SINCLAIR,** *Class Structure and Populist Protest: The Case of Western Canada,* in *Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie,* 1975, Spring, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 2.

[8] **C. REINEMANN, T. AALBERG, F. ESSER, J. STRÖMBÄCK, C.H. de VREESE,** *Populist political communication: Toward a model of its causes, forms, and effects,* in *Populist Political Communication in Europe,* ed. by T. AALBERG, F. ESSER, C. REINEMANN, J. STRÖMBÄCK, C.H. DE VREESE, Routledge, 2017, New York, p. 2.

[9] **N. URBINATI,** *Democracy and Populism,* cit., p. 119.

[10] **J. KYLE, L. GULTCHIN,** *Populists in Power Around the World,* Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, London, 2018, p. 11.

[11] **B. STANLEY,** *The thin ideology of populism,* in *Journal of Political Ideologies,* 2008, vol. 13, no. 1, p. 101.

[12] **C. MUDDE,** *The Populist Zeitgeist,* in *Government and Opposition,* 2004, vol. 39, no. 4, p. 543.

ideas. Populism as a 'thin' ideology is the common denominator shared by all its manifestations and it can be combined with other ideologies, such as socialism, to provide a more complete picture of the world. Populism (as a rather 'thin' ideology) refers to the relationship among the people, the elite and the populist actor, while populism as a 'full' ideology specifies who is included in or excluded from those groups[13].

As is pointed out by Ben Stanley, populism is an ideology of empirical origins. This scholar believes that populism does not have the characteristic features of the comprehensive, or 'full' ideology, yet an explicitly contradictory nature of its various manifestations does not exclude the possibility of differentiating it as an ideology in general. More of a way, populism is a 'thin' ideology ambiguous by virtue of lacking a program center and open in its capacity to coexist with others, more comprehensive ideologies[14].

Some scholars propose not to view populism as ideology.

For example, Bart Bonikowski thinks that populism can be viewed as an ideology which makes it relatively easy to analyze, placing it on similar analytical footing with liberalism or conservatism. The trouble with this approach, however, is that unlike most political ideologies, populism is based on a rudimentary moral logic that does not provide a general understanding of society or politics. In other words, says Bart Bonikowski, populism does not offer a certain worldview; at best, it offers a simplistic critique of existing "configurations of power". This is quite different from liberalism or conservatism, which are based on well-articulated principles. Populism can be viewed not as an ideology, but rather as a certain discursive frame[15].

2.4 - Characteristic features and elements of populism

Jane Mansbridge and Stephen Macedo identify the key elements of populism as follows: "a) people b) in a moral c) battle against d) elites". As a rule, populism offers antagonism of this sort between the two groups of the population[16].

Ben Stanley identifies the following interrelated concepts that make up the basis of populism:
- existence of two homogeneous entities - "people" and "elites";
- antagonistic interaction between the people and the elite;
- the idea of natural sovereignty;

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[13] **W. WIRTH, F. ESSER, M. WETTSTEIN, et al.,** *The appeal of populist ideas, strategies and styles: A theoretical model and research design for analyzing populist political communication,* in *National Centre of Competence in Research: Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century,* 2016, May, *Working Paper n. 88,* p. 9.

[14] **B. STANLEY,** *The thin ideology of populism,* cit., p. 99.

[15] **B. BONIKOWSKI,** *Three Lessons of Contemporary Populism in Europe and the United States,* in *Brown Journal of World Affairs,* 2016, Fall/Winter, vol. XXIII, no. I, pp. 12, 15.

[16] **J. MANSBRIDGE, S. MACEDO,** *Populism and Democratic Theory,* in *Annual Review of Law and Social Science,* 2019, vol. 15, p. 60.

- positive view of the "people" and blackening of the "elite"[17].

Peter Sinclair identifies the following key characteristic features of populism:

- the framework of the populist ideology underlines the value of the common people and their political superiority;

- rejection of the intermediate interaction between the leaders and the masses;

- a tendency to populist protest directed against a certain group outside the confines of the corresponding society (searching for external reasons of existing privations that constitutes the basis of nationalistic and isolationistic sentiments of populism);

- populism usually demands reformation of the capitalistic structure rather than social revolution, innovations are accepted on condition that their objective is to change an existing status quo so as to make it more tolerant to the common people[18].

Jordan Kyle and Limor Gultchin specify two key traits of populism:

- it is implied that the people are in a state of conflict with those outside of it;

- it is affirmed that nothing should limit the will of the true people[19].

The key characteristic feature of populism is anti-elitism manifested in accusations and criticism of various types of elites, institutions, "the system"[20].

Alain Touraine notes that a characteristic feature of populism is existence of multiple intrinsic contradictions, such as populism being a movement or an ideology that protects traditional values while addressing the issues of economic and social changes, looking towards the past and the future at the same time[21].

Christa Deiwiks identifies the following conditions promoting the emergence of populism:

- poor socioeconomic conditions or other crises, particularly recurring ones;

- opaqueness of political institutions;

- charismatic leaders adopting a certain style and rhetoric are also characteristic for populist movements[22].

Populism appears in different ways in different contexts[23].

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[17] **B. STANLEY,** *The thin ideology of populism*, cit., p. 102.

[18] **P.R. SINCLAIR,** *Class Structure,* cit., pp. 2-4.

[19] **J. KYLE, L. GULTCHIN,** *Populists in Power Around the World,* Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, London, 2018, p. 12.

[20] **C. REINEMANN, T. AALBERG, F. ESSER, J. STRÖMBÄCK, C.H. de VREESE,** *Populist political communication,* cit., p. 3.

[21] **I. BERLIN, R. HOFSTADTER, D. MACRAE, et al.,** *To define populism,* in *Government and Opposition,* Spring, vol. 3, n. 2, 1968, p. 158.

[22] **C. DEIWIKS**, *Populism,* in *Living Reviews in Democracy,* 2009, p. 3.

[23] J. **KYLE, L. GULTCHIN,** *Populists in Power Around the World,* Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2018, London, p. 21.

2.5 - Taxonomic diversity of populism

Scholars identify various types of populism using diverse guidelines for classifying it.

Jordan Kyle and Limor Gultchin identify such types of populism as:

- cultural populism (emphasizing religious traditionalism, law and order, national sovereignty);

- socio-economic populism (emphasizing anti-capitalism, solidarity of the working class and, often, portraying foreign businesses as hostile);

- anti-establishment (emphasizes ridding the state of corruption and strong leadership to promote reforms)[24].

A different benchmark is chosen to identify left-wing and right-wing populism.

Left-wing populism defines the people as a class and sees them opposed to an economic elite, right-wing populism, by contrast, defines the people as an ethnos and sees them opposed to a political and cultural elite[25].

Rudiger Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards define economic populism as an approach to economics that emphasizes growth and income redistribution and deemphasizes the risks of inflation and deficit finance, external constraints, and the reaction of economic agents to aggressive nonmarket policies[26].

2.6 - Populism and democracy

Populism entails a specific vision of democracy and representation that places particular emphasis on the sovereignty of the people [27].

In scientific literature one can often see a position claiming an existence of a close connection between democracy and populism yet, according to Gianfranco Pasquino, it is by no means as clear-cut. Such connection can, indeed, be easily demonstrated as both democracy and populism recognize the priority of the people yet the definition of democracy must be more comprehensive than a mere reference to the "power of the people". Populists, moreover, usually reject, as this writer believes, structures of political mediation between the people and the leader[28].

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[24] J. **KYLE, L. GULTCHIN,** *Populists in Power*, cit., p. 21.
[25] **W. WIRTH, F. ESSER, M. WETTSTEIN et al.,** *The appeal of populist ideas,* cit., p. 9.
[26] **R. DORNBUSCH, S. EDWARDS,** *The Macroeconomics of Populism*, in *The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America*, ed. by R. DORNBUSCH and S. EDWARDS, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991, p. 9.
[27] **W. WIRTH, F. ESSER, M. WETTSTEIN et al.,** *The appeal of populist ideas, strategies*, cit., p. 15.
[28] **G. PASQUINO,** *Populism and Democracy*, in *Twenty-First Century Populism*, ed. by D. ALBERTAZZI, D. MCDONNELL, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, London, p. 15.

The overriding classic populist premise reiterated by various leaders and movements in many established democracies lies in the claim that politics has gotten out of the control of the people. In contrast to officials and politicians, populist leaders articulate the agenda of the masses. While it is the negative aspects of populist movements that draw most attention, they can claim legitimacy through appealing to the people and calling for the democracy to be restored[29].

On the other hand, the key elements of populism are not anti-democratic - as Jane Mansbridge and Stephen Macedo point out. Democracy also needs a populist impulse in certain historical moments[30].

Daron Acemoglu, Georgy Egorov and Konstantin Sonin believe that the driving force of populist politics is the weakness of democratic institutions, which makes voters believe that politicians, despite their rhetoric, might have a right-wing agenda or may be corrupted by the rich lobby. Populist policies thus emerge as a way for politicians to signal that they will choose future policies in line with the interests of the median voter[31].

3 - Religion and populism

Although, according to Loris Zanatta, "the link between populism and religion is obvious and conspicuous"[32], José Pedro Zúquete claims that the study of the relationship between populism and religion has for a long time remained a neglected area of social-scientific research[33].

This has the more significant appeal to the scholars as regards the ontology of a secular state.

3.1 - Religious populism as subtype of populism

Religious populism translated by religious or politic figures and associated groups is, in the words of José Pedro Zúquete, a form of populism that separates its conceptual center, but reproduces it in a certain religious way or mode[34].

According to Ionuţ Apahideanu,

"religious populism fluidly covers a phenomenological area that idiosyncratically combines religious revitalisation and political and

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[29] **M. CANOVAN,** *Taking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy*, in *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, ed. by Y. MÉNY, Y. SUREL, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, London, p. 27.

[30] **J. MANSBRIDGE, S. MACEDO,** *Populism and Democratic Theory*, cit., pp. 70-71.

[31] **D. ACEMOGLU, G. EGOROV, K. SONIN,** *A political theory of populism*, in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 2013, p. 802.

[32] Quoted by: **R. DEMARCHI,** *La relación*, cit.

[33] **J.P. ZÚQUETE,** *Populism and religion*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. by C.R. KALTWASSER, P. TAGGART, P. OCHOA ESPEJO, P. OSTIGUY, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017, pp. 565–590.

[34] **J.P. ZÚQUETE,** *Populism and religion*, cit., p. 566.

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social activism, modernity-related identity crises, and an increasing disillusionment with (post-) modernity and with the currently mainstream political philosophy on good government and society, the latter manifested locally as Euroscepticism. Essentially, it represents a subtype of populism, whose dimensions it fully replicates, but in a specific religious key: descriptively, the fundamental unit is still the people, but one further specified according to religious identity and as such distinguishable from outsiders; normatively, there is or should not be a higher imperative than this religious people's view… In comparison to other types of populism, the religious one bears an additional anti-modernist emphasis, one explainable by the significantly dialectical nature between traditional religion and secular modernity"[35].

3.2 - Freedom of expression and populism

Issues of active protection of the rights of believers for their human dignity and protection of their religious feelings from blatant abuse by freedom of self-expression are often connected with populism in the field of religion.

Thematic horizon of populism and religion is, in the vast majority of cases, viewed in the context, and in the discourse, of the confrontation of liberal ideology that keeps finding faults with, and laying ever more extravagant claims against, religions and religious organizations and believers that represent them, and specifically this macro-community of believers in its institutionalized and non-institutionalized forms. Reducing this agenda to this aspect alone does not lend any firm foothold and prospects (we are interested in a different approach, remote from mutual ideologically motivated labeling), yet it would be equally impossible to avoid such questions. All the more so as the opponents of believers refer to the demands to refrain from abusing their religious feelings as populism.

In Russia, judicial and other law-enforcement practices in relation to the cases of human dignity humiliation and insult of believers' religious feelings have been accumulated intensively.

The analysis of the standards of the Russian and foreign state's criminal (anti-extremist) legislation[36], and also legal precedents based on such norms gives the necessary and sufficient grounds for allocation of the following **direct groups of objects and actually objects of illegal offence (objects of direct influence, manipulations) at committing of the actions oriented to an insult of religious feelings of believers and to humiliation of their human dignity in connection with their confession of religion (on the grounds of religious belief):**

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[35] **I. APAHIDEANU,** *Religious populism: the coup de grâce to secularisation theories*, in *South-East European Journal of Political Science*, 2014, vol. II, no. 1, pp. 77-78.

[36] See: **I.V. PONKIN,** *In merito alla tutela dei sentimenti religiosi e della dignità individuale dei credenti*, in *Diritto Penale Contemporaneo*, 26 febbraio 2016.

1) images of persons (personalities) in respect of which believers carry out religious worship or religious honoring or express special religious respect: images of the person in respect of which believers carry out religious worship (God, the image of God); images of persons in respect of which believers carry out religious honoring (in orthodox Christianity - the canonized church-wide church or locally venerated sanctified, etc.); images of persons in respect of which believers express special religious respect and the authority of which is inseparably connected with the authority of the religious organization (or even religion) in general: heads of religious organizations, priests (religious attendants), monks, theologians, etc., especially authoritative among believers, both living and deceased; generalized image of the priest (religious attendant) of this particular religion during lawful execution of official (religious) duties (holding a church service, other religious practice, or a ceremony included) or in connection with such execution of the specified duties;

2) the main religious symbols in respect of which believers carry out religious worship or religious honoring, or concerning which believers are most sensitive regarding the human dignity and the religious feelings;

3) religious texts in respect of which believers carry out religious worship or religious honoring, or in respect of which believers are most sensitive: the sacred book (sacred books, Scriptures) of the religion in general as a particular (historically existing) text; substantially key, widely usable and/or recognizable texts or fragments of the texts of sacred books (Scriptures) of this particular religion;

4) reputational image of the religion (confession, religious organization) in general, and also generalized reputation character of its believers; the specific lexical structures and words recognizably indigenously belonging to particular religion and/or the religious organization representing it, including the names of religion and its believers, titles of its religious attendants, etc.;

5) objectified images and icons honored by believers: image of an icon (including copies, photo, or reproduction); statues, bas-reliefs, and other sculptural or architectural objects representing or containing the main and most honored religious symbols or objects in relation of which believers carry out religious worship or religious honoring or concerning which believers are most sensitive; visual images of the honored by believers religious symbols of religion and/or the religious organization representing it; material or virtual (by means of computer technologies) objectification of an image of the person in relation of which believers carry out religious worship or religious honoring, or express special religious respect, - visual images (photos, pictures, drawings, etc.), audiovisual, and also text images; the recognizable piece of music which is historically used for liturgy, for worship singing, etc. in this particular religion;

6) religiously honored or respected by believers (or by means of which believers carry out religious honoring or express respect) material

objects of religious purpose or other material objects, integrally connected with religious practices and/or religious feelings (experiences) of believers;

7) religious order (autonomous order - as a form and part of the social order within the sphere of autonomous standard competence of the religious organization)[37].

In such cases populism is an inefficient tool more in the vein of a rhetoric cover-up for the actions clearly going beyond what is admissible or acceptable in a democratic state based on the rule of law.

Yet it is the debates about populism that are important to realize and understand the limits of where freedom of expression (thought, speech, art) ends and the field of religious feelings as protected and defended by the law (including criminal law) begins. And, on the other hand, to understand where the boundaries of the interference of the government in the sphere of freedom of self-expression lie for the purposes of legal and criminal defense and protection of religious sentiment and human dignity of believers. From a legal standpoint, the object of criminal encroachment of the "blasphemers" and "slanderers" is by no means God himself, quite in contrary to how the defenders of such persons who publicly committed acts of "blasphemy" and "slander" would like, without any reasonable ground, to have us believe falsely presuming that this is an allegedly a matter of theology, and therefore beyond any legal domain. In reality, the object of criminal encroachment in such situations are people (believers), their rights, liberties and lawful interests, their human dignity and religious feelings, as well as public interest related to the necessity of protecting and defending the human dignity of believers, including those in the sphere of public security, public order in general.

So much so as in the vast majority of democratic states based on the rule of law there exist means of criminal and legal protection of human dignity and the feelings of believers provided by their legislation.

3.3 - Populism as a tool of politicization of a religious organization

These days populism is undergoing constant revamping, transforming into a toolkit of foreign policies (aggressive missionary policies) of a number of religious organizations thus posing quite a significant threat to the religious world[38].

3.4 - Populism as a latent component of implicitly sacralized (albeit explicitly neutral) politics

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[37] See: **I.V. PONKIN,** *Direct Objects of Offence at Committing of the Acts Oriented to an Insult of Religious Feelings of Believers and to Humiliation of their Human Dignity*, in *Forensic Research & Criminology International Journal*, 2017, vol. 5, n. 5.

[38] See: **I.V. PONKIN,** *Opinion on act (decision), adopted by the Holy Synod of the Patriarchate of Constantinople on 11 October 2018*, in *Stato, Chiese e pluralismo confessionale*, 2019, n. 2.

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According to José Pedro Zúquete, another dimension of religious populism is a hidden religious one bespeaking the sacralization of politics in contemporary societies. The process of sacralization of politics which occurs when politics assumes a transcendental character. This dimension is shaped by religion in a wider sense concentrating, above all, on the experience of the sacred and the function it fulfils actively and radically changing the ordinary in routine policies[39].

4 - Conclusion

Populism has become a buzzword to refer to a disparate range of phenomena that appear to have much in common but can involve radically different ideas, sentiments and politics[40]. According to Ionuţ Apahideanu, approximating "religious populism" seems quite a challenge for the social scientist, considering that over half of century of literature in the field did not yet succeed in providing an at least majoritarily, let alone consensually, accepted standard meaning of the very paternal term of "populism". Populism also belongs to a category of umbrella-terms whose frequency of usage, in both the academic and political realms, seems inversely proportional to the accuracy of its meaning[41].

A social and legal instrument the basis of which is impregnated with the paradigm of populism is by no means straightforward and harmless. In the words of Cornelius Plantinga, "evil contaminates every scalpel designed to remove it". On the other hand, Edmund Burke, an English conservative politician, once said: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing".

This instrument (with populism in its paradigm basis) should be used with utmost caution, especially in the sphere of religion in a secular state.

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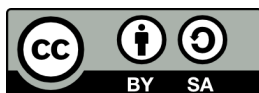
[39] **J.P. ZÚQUETE,** *Populism and religion*, cit., pp. 567, 574.
[40] **D. NILSSON DEHANAS, M. SHTERIN,** *Religion and the Rise of Populism*, in *Religion, State and Society*, 2018, vol.46, no.3, pp. 177-185.
[41] **I. APAHIDEANU,** *Religious populism*, cit., pp. 71-72.