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STRUCTURAL PARALLELS BETWEEN POPULISM AND CATHOLICISM: *VOX POPULI, VOX DEI*

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Abstract. Why do populist groups attract religion as a partner or foe? Responses to this question often remain on the functional level and primarily stress the material content of populist and religious doctrines. Thus, they generate heated partisan polemics rather than enlightening insight. This multidisciplinary study focuses on the structural parallels in gathering people and discovering their authoritative will in the body politic and religious. First, it notes the family resemblance in their composition. Given the populist association of 'the people' with the nation, the authoritative will of the people serves as its ground and goal. The Christian *ekklesia* or gathered people of God rely on the *sensus fidei* as orientation, process, and content in gathering the faithful. Second, both populism and religion aim to articulate the authoritative will of their constituents. Populist groups seek to discover the *vox populi* in the socio-historical processes that constitute them. Christian ecclesial communities discern *vox Dei*, also within and not apart from their socio-historical processes. With these structural parallels between the populist body politic and the religious *ekklesia*, intersections between populism and religion are likely to occur.

Keywords: *populism; religion; Philippines; Duterte; vox populi*

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Laying the Groundwork

Earlier studies like the 2017 *Oxford Handbook of Populism* focused on identifying the basic core around which people are gathered.[1] Some proposed ideological doctrine as its center; others, political strategy, and still others, performance style. More recently, however, scholars have shown that these three proposals are not mutually exclusive and therefore could be integrated under a more operative description. According to Olivas Osuna, "today populism is broadly understood as a distinct form of politics that champions 'the people' and their sovereignty while antagonizing political—and/or other—elites or a multi-faceted establishment that is seen as unresponsive to popular needs and aspirations."[2]

This essay takes this operational description and proceeds to its consideration of the much-heated discussion of the link between populism and religion. For instance, populist leaders like Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, America's Donald Trump, and the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte have engaged religious groups regarding controversial issues such as COVID-19 vaccination, the war on drugs, and immigration.

These discussions, however, fail to shed greater light, as they remain on the surface functional level. They consider such interactions as either politicizing the sacred or sacralising the political; the former "refers to the ways in which, in old and present times—both in moderate and extreme forms—traditional religion serves to legitimize a social order, a particular regime, or a political community against destructive forces" while the later to when politics "is viewed and experienced as a tool for total change, anchored in myths, rites, and

[1] Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser *et al.* (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[2] Jose Javier Olivas Osuno, "From chasing populists to deconstructing populism: a multidimensional approach to understanding and comparing populism," *European Journal of Political Research* 60 (2021): 833.

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symbols that galvanize group solidarity and give ultimate meaning to the life and destiny of communities."[3]

Moreover, this essay considers such functional links as inadequate and thus takes a multidisciplinary perspective. It does not engage in partisan polemic arguments about which approach is correct, much less whether Trump or Duterte's populism is morally grounded. It poses the central fundamental question, why populist groups attract religion as committed partners or bitter foes.

In moving from the functional to the fundamental, it affirms the characterization of the people as dynamic and underlines its fundamental quality, that is, its character that lends it authority beyond the empirical. In this sense, it may be even regarded "theological," not in the narrow disciplinary sense of *fides quarens intellectum* [faith seeking understanding] in Anselm's classic description.[4]

This multidisciplinary essay then proceeds to examine the sociohistorical processes of gathering people and discerning their sovereign voices for both the body politic and the religious community. What becomes apparent is that structural parallels are found in both. Hence, even though these processes remain distinct, intersections are likely to appear.

First, the essay notes the analogous composition of populist groups and religious communities. Without denying their differences, both involve composing their constituencies; for populism, through its links with nationalism and democracy, and for the Catholic *ekklesia*, through the *sensus fidei* [sense of faith] as orientation, process, and content. Catholicism is chosen, not only because it is the dominant Philippine religious tradition but also because it is the most institutionally differentiated.

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[3] Jose Pedro Zuguete,"Populism and Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* eds. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 445-66 at 446 and 450.

[4] Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, trans. Max J. Charlesworth (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979).

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Second, both populist and Christian groups engage in analogous dynamics of finding the authoritative voice of the people or of God through the people's voices. "Authority," it must be remembered, comes from the Latin *auctor*, initially referring to origin and only later to a text's writer. Whether in the context of the body politic or religious, the people as gathered possess the aura of authority, because "authority is what enables a community to be bound together in all its interactions."[5] Given these two structural parallels, it is then unlikely that intersections between populism appear.

Populist Body Politic in Search of *Vox Populi*

This section highlights two central features of the populist body politic—first, its composition of those it counts as part of the people, and second, its dynamism to discover the people's authoritative will.

Gathering the Populist Body Politic

Populist association with nationalism and democracy is commonplace. Thus, many modern nations and democracies appeal to the will of the people as their basis as well as their goal. This theme of the will of the people weaves through the nexus of populism, nationalism, and democracy. Its authoritative character emerges in the gathering of the nation and is expressed through differing political practices and organizations.

First and foremost, as Gellner writes, "nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist."[6] This process of constructing the nation accounts for "the long-standing historical identification of 'the people' with 'the nation' and even the 're-emergence of nationalist-populist politics'."[7] Furthermore, this process of gathering people engages

[5] David J. Stagaman, *Authority in the Church* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 35.

[6] Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964), p. 169.

[7] Anastasiou and Custodi, "The Populism-Nationalism Nexus," p. 23.

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various constituent sectors with differing goals and interests, some in agreement, others in conflict.

In general, then, goals and grounds for gathering the people determine those included and those excluded on account of what Anastasiou and Custodi describe as "their symbolic and socio-historical dimensions as well as their role in fostering forms of identification."[8] Its "broad and diffuse institutionalization enables it to signify not only diverse social configurations, but multiple forms of exclusions as well…"[9]

Moreover, this "nationalist" tag is applied across a wide spectrum of social realities from the mundane to the systemic, from the benign to the bellicose. Thus, national cuisine and artistic forms generate pride just as do "bellicose forms of exclusion that could enable exploitation, oppressions and violence (e.g., against ethnic minorities and immigrants)."[10]

Such applications could take institutional form through the nation-state. After all, "'the nation' is what symbolically demarcates the (institutional) limits of modern political communities (e.g. 'the nation-state,' 'national citizenship,' 'national sovereignty,' 'national elections,' etc.)" and "conjures up a world outlook, wherein the limits of 'culture' and 'society' are seen as being coeval and coterminous with a particular political apparatus operating over a determinate territory."[11]

Given such apparent totalisation in the nation-state, it is perhaps not surprising that many contemporary populist leaders hold public office, despite claiming to be outside the political establishment.

These populist links with nationalism also raise the question "whether populism is, at heart, anti-democratic."[12] In response, one

[8] Anastasiou and Custodi, "The Populism-Nationalism Nexus," p. 26.

[9] Anastasiou and Custodi, "The Populism-Nationalism Nexus," p. 27.

[10] Anastasiou and Custodi, "The Populism-Nationalism Nexus," p. 27.

[11] Anastasiou and Custodi, "The Populism-Nationalism Nexus," p. 27.

[12] Anastasiou and Custodi, "The Populism-Nationalism Nexus," p. 27.

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cannot take either "entrenched theoretical inclinations, considering populism to be inherently undemocratic or illiberal," what is relevant is how the authoritative character of the people, that is, the will of the people, finds expression in democratic forms of governance.

Nootens thus underscores what lies at the core of the will of the people—the conversion of "the multitude" to "the people" or, in other words, the construction of the people.

In Search of *Vox Populi*

The second feature of the populist body politic is its orientation to discover the authoritative will of the people, which is not divorced from but is integral to the people as a process. Thus, "we consequently deem it methodologically prudent to understand populism and nationalism as sets of family resemblance (Wittgenstein 1967) that are contextually situated and, in certain cases, historically entrenched (Laclau 1990:35-50)."[13]

The categories of "the people" and "the nation" are understood "as symbolic fields through which political practice and forms of social organization are enabled."[14] What this implies then is that the authoritative will of the people cannot be identified and reduced to that of a particular group, even the majority, or, much less, its leader; "It is, rather, the precise product of political acts that, on an ongoing basis, *reproduce the populist logic across time and space*."[15] This authoritative will of the people, then, much like the composition of the people, is not a perspective or program defined *a priori* or abstracted from a specific context, but the continuing articulation of dynamic social practice from all those constituting the people.

To this end, it employs both formal and informal mechanisms that are meant to express the people's voice. For example, constitutionally

[13] Anastasiou and Custodi, "The Populism-Nationalism Nexus," p. 28.

[14] Anastasiou and Custodi, "The Populism-Nationalism Nexus," p. 26.

[15] Anastasiou and Custodi, "The Populism-Nationalism Nexus," p. 27.

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mandated processes like elections and referenda serve as means by which constituent sectors speak their voices to those in governance. In addition, mass actions by way of "the parliament of the streets" provide venues for those at society's margins.

However, for both platforms, the importance of integrity in these processes cannot be overstated if they are to discover the authoritative will of the body politic. For instance, in the case of democracies, the majority vote cannot be automatically regarded as "the will of the people" without serious consideration of whether elections or referenda have been free and fair, whether the constituents have been critically informed and formed, and whether the rights and welfare of minorities have not been violated.

The Catholic *Sensus Fidei* Discerning *Vox Dei*

This section shows that the historical character of Christian revelation does not undermine its supernatural origin. Thus, the triple meaning of the *sensus fidei* as orientation, as process of discovery, and as content of faith grounds its authoritative nature.

Gathering People in the *Sensus Fidei*

The *ekklesia*, the church assembly, is characterized by two features—gathering of the people in the *sensus fidei* and discerning the *vox Dei*. This theme is first explicitly articulated in the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium* [*LG* 4] but considered as long operative in the church's scripture and history.[16]

The gathering of the *ekklesia* in the *sensus fidei* must be understood in the context of its supernatural origin. First, this supernatural origin of God's revelation and self-communication does not imply "out of" or independent from the world of time and space. Indeed, unlike any community and organization, Christianity's origin comes from God's initiative through the historical life and ministry of Jesus Christ: "His

[16] International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, 2014, http://www.vatican.va. (hereafter cited as SF).

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[God's] will was that men should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made Flesh in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature (cf. Eph 2:18; 2 Pet 1:4) [*DV* 2].[17]

Moreover, "God graciously arranged [that] all the things he had once revealed for the salvation of all peoples should remain in its entirety, through all the ages, and be transmitted to all generations" [*DV* 7]. Thus the community of the followers of Jesus—first, the apostles and subsequently disciples from all ages and places—receive and transmit this revelation through Scripture, "the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit" and Tradition, which "transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit" [DV 9].

What this underlines is that the *ekklesia*, the gathering of the faithful, though it considers its origin in God's revelation, receives and transmits this revelation in time and space—the ministry of Jesus, the preaching of the first disciples, the commitment into writing of scriptures, and the ongoing transmission of revelation. In other words, the supernatural origin, reception, and transmission of God's revelation in Jesus Christ is mediated through human socio-historical processes, not from some ideal and perfect world.

What this also implies is that this gathering in the *sensus fidei* is not bound to any particular historical order, be it that of ancient Israel, medieval Europe, or any other. Its divine character is, in fact, manifested in and not diminished by the open-ended process through which it is incarnated in diverse contexts. Thus, it is empowered to undertake its universal mission in the most challenging circumstances.

Discerning the *Vox Dei*

Christianity's divine origin and universal mission lay the groundwork for discerning the authoritative character of the faithful.

[17] Documents of the Second Vatican Council, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm. Particular documents are referenced with their Latin titles followed by the original paragraph number.

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This authoritative character finds expression in the different dimensions of the *sensus fidei*: as an active orientation toward faith, as the process of discovering the faith, and as the expression of what the faith consists.

First, the *sensus fidei* as an orientation toward faith [e.g., *LG* 12] is described by Vatican II in many analogous terms: *sensus Ecclesiae* ["the sense of the Church" *DV* 23], *sensus apostolicus* ["the apostolic sense" *Apostolicam actuositatem* (*AA* 25)], and *sensus catholicus* [*"the catholic sense*" (AA 30)]. All these emphasize its origin from God and therefore its authoritative character: the whole body of the faithful receives "an anointing from the holy one (cf. 1 Jn. 2:20 and 27)" and "[t]his characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people" (*LG* 12).

Second, the process through which this supernatural orientation discovers what the faith consists in operates within the historical processes through which God's revelation in Jesus Christ is communicated, received, and transmitted to all. This link of the *sensus fidei* to the historical unfolding of God's revelation and of its transmission in tradition is stated by the ITC document thus: "the *sensus fidei* is presented as Christ's gift to the faithful, and once again is described as an active capacity by which the faithful are able to understand, live, and proclaim the truths of divine revelation. It is the basis for their work of evangelization" (*SF* 45). In addition, this active capacity "is also evoked in the council's teaching on the development of doctrine, in the context of the transmission of the apostolic faith. *Dei Verbum* says that the apostolic Tradition 'makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit'" (*SF* 45).

Thus, sensing the faith could be described by the traditional theological image of seeing with the eyes of faith, "enabling the one church throughout the world to receive revelation faithfully and meaningfully, and then to tradition it effectively."[18] What this implies is that the authoritative character of the *sensus fidei* is not appended to

[18] Ormond Rush, *The Eyes of Faith: The Sense of the Faithful and the Church's Reception of Revelation* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), p. 241.

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but is integral to the dynamic nature of the People of God as receiver and transmitter of God's revelation in Jesus Christ.

Third and of great import is the meaning of the *sensus fidei* in terms of what the faith consists in and its relation to the official teaching office [*magisterium*]. The *sensus fidei* is characteristic of "the whole body of the faithful" comprised of those with official teaching position in the *magisterium*, those in the theological community with their specific expertise and the majority laity with "a knowledge by empathy, or a knowledge of the heart" (*SF* 50), which is derived from "the concrete reality of the existential situations in which he or she is placed by family, professional and cultural relations" and "enriches the personal experience of the believer" and "enables him or her to see more precisely the value and the limits of a given doctrine, and to propose ways of refining its formulation" (*SF* 54).

These three meanings of the *sensus fidei* are realized through formal and non-formal processes and structures. For instance, when a particular religious belief or practice generates ecclesial division, the church lays down specific protocols for evaluation.

These protocols notwithstanding, the *sensus fidei* primarily operates as a vibrant sensing of faith rather than a formal juridical protocol. Thus the dogmatic definitions of Mary's Immaculate Conception, Pius IX's *Ineffabilis Deus* [*ID* (1854)] and her Assumption into Heaven in Pius XII's *Munificentissimus Deus* [*MD* (1950)] state these doctrines as integral to the faith of "the universal Church, in which the Spirit of truth actively dwells, and which is infallibly guided by him to an ever more perfect knowledge of revealed truths, [and which] has down the centuries manifested her belief in many ways" [*ND* 714].[19] In other words, their definitive status comes not as the product of a formal protocol but from the lived faith of the *ekklesia* for centuries. Consequently but surprisingly, the ITC document speaks of the infallibility of the *sensus fidei*, affirming "the idea that the Church as

[19] Jacques Dupuis, S.J. and Joseph Neuner, S.J. (eds.), *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* Sixth Revised and Enlarged Edition (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1999), p. 263.

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a whole is infallible in her belief, since she is the body and bride of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12:27; Eph 4:12; 5:21–32; Rev 21:9), and that all of her members have an anointing that teaches them (cf. 1 John 2:20, 27), being endowed with the Spirit of truth (cf. John 16:13), is everywhere apparent from the very beginnings of Christianity" (*SF* 7). Another subsequent text states, "the *sensus fidei fidelis* [the sense of faith of the faithful] is infallible in itself concerning its object: the true faith," thus indicating the theological significance of lived Christianity (*SF* 55).

Intersections in Populist and Religious Dynamics

The preceding sections note the difference in nature as well as in vision-mission of the body politic and the religious community. However, both are vulnerable to nationalistic and other forces. It is common that populist groups and religious communities take on a nationalistic ethos. Conflicts have been fought and wars waged on the basis of nationalist, ethnic, and other differences.

Furthermore, the search for the populist vox populi has also taken on the aura of divine providence. Hence, the common construal of the *vox populi* as *de facto* or *de jure vox Dei*. This apparent mantle of transcendence has made antagonisms between groups and communities even violent.

Given these structural parallels in their gathering of people as well as in their search for their sovereign will, various forms of intersections between these processes are likely to take place. They could range from those based on specific issues to those where both processes become conflated.

Example of Specific Intersection

This is illustrated in the nationalist and revolutionary movements during the late nineteenth century. Different constituencies and groups with their distinct interests responded to Spanish colonial rule from their own interests. According to John N. Schumacher, the 1898 Philippine Revolution and its short-lived Philippine Republic "allows us to see

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the plurality of movements which coalesced into the Revolution—the many *revolutions* within the one *Revolution*. For there were many aspirations in the late nineteenth-century Spanish Philippines which hoped for their fulfilment from a national revolution."[20] These included "aspirations for modernizing economic reforms," "the desire for the civil and political liberties comprehended in nineteenth-century European liberalism," "the *kalayaan* sought by the peasant masses" and "a separate Filipino nationality" first articulated by the native clergy.[21]

There were even differences in their views regarding relations with Catholicism. First were those who desired a close relation for either religious or nationalist ends. Thus, Felipe Calderon, among others, voted for the establishment of Christianity under the Malolos Constitution of the short-lived Republic. In contrast, nationalists Isabelo de los Reyes and Fr. Gregorio Aglipay desired a church decidedly nationalist, and although other reasons obtain, they eventually established a schismatic church called *Iglesia Filipina Independiente* (IFI) [Philippine Independent Church].

Nevertheless, these different groups with varied internal interests were united in their opposition to Spanish colonial rule. Some among the *illustrados* initially lobbied for equal representation between Spaniards and colonials, but were pushed toward seeking independence through a revolutionary movement.

But geopolitical events, the Spanish-American War in particular, overtook its course with the incorporation of the Philippines as a colony under the U.S. Hence, the Philippine Revolution became known as "unfinished" and the nation as "aborted."[22]

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[20] John N. Schumacher, *Revolutionary Clergy: The Filipino Clergy and the Nationalist Movement*, 1850-1903 (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1981), 268-69.

[21] Schumacher, *Revolutionary Clergy*, 268-70.

[22] Floro C. Quibuyen, *A Nation Aborted: Rizal, American Hegemony, and Philippine Nationalism* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1999).

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Example of Conflation

This is illustrated in the sociohistorical dynamics of forming the colonial body politic and the colonial Catholic Church begun during the sixteenth century. This process arose in accordance with the *Patronato Real de las Indias*, the juridical agreement between the Spanish monarchy and the Papacy that put the task of evangelization in the colonies under the monarchy.[23] Thus, the monarchy and papacy remained distinct and even disagreed in certain matters, but they were collaborators in the evangelical mission. This intersection transformed the native into both a colonial subject and a baptized Catholic.

Two important infrastructures facilitated this intersection and the subsequent transformation. First, small scattered reduced and centralized in Spanish-style towns where church and government buildings occupied prominent places in the *plaza*.[24] This reduction was further reinforced by the lack of Spanish personnel, so that the Spanish parish priest often took colonial tasks.

Furthermore, native languages were also reduced, that is, transformed from their syllabic form and codified in the Roman alphabet.[25] This linguistic reduction allowed colonials to learn these native languages. Thus, *Doctrina Christiana,* the first book printed, carries renditions of Catholic prayers in syllabic as well as alphabetized forms.[26] Communication between native and Spanish about Catholic and secular matters employed the same Romanized form of the native languages.

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[23] John N. Schumacher, *Readings in Philippine Church History* (Quezon City: Loyola School of Theology, 1979), 9.

[24] Rene B. Javellana, "The Tenacious Village," Paper presented at the Colloquium on Nations, Cities, Civilizations, stories and Arguments (Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, 4 February 2003), pp. 2-3.

[25] Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1988), 90.

[26] *Doctrina Cristiana: The First Book Printed in the Philippines*, Manila 1593 (Manila: National Historical Institute, 1991).

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This intersection of the formation of the colonial body politic and the colonial Catholic Church was so entrenched that those who escaped the centralized towns and returned to the mountains were called *remontados*, that is, renegade apostates of the faith.

Concluding Remarks

These cases exemplify forms of intersection as a result of structural parallels between the populist body politic and the religious community. Whether in specific form or conflated, whether due to external forces or internal interests, intersections appear bound to occur despite the imposition of American-style constitutional separation of church and state. Thus, intersections of Philippine populist and religious dynamics continue to surface in twentieth-century developments during the People Power EDSA Revolutions or the Duterte presidency. Bearing this in mind prevents narrow partisanship of whatever political color and promotes a better understanding of collusion between populism and religion.



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