



EUROPE'S CONCEPTUAL CHRISTIANS

TEXT BY TERESA REITER / PHOTO BY PETER MATE

RIGHT-WING POPULIST PARTIES
ADOPT PSEUDORELIGION AS THEY TRY TO REMAKE
SOCIETY IN HOMOGENEOUS MOLD.

KOSOVO 2.0

— THE SMALL TOWN OF LE PUY-EN-VELA, France, is a popular starting point for the Way of St. James, a pilgrimage thousands take every year to Cathedral Santiago de Compostela in Spain. French President Nicolas Sarkozy visited Le Puy-en-Vela in March 2011, and with his eye on the town's cathedral, he praised "the magnificent heritage of civilization and culture that Christianity has left to us," according to The New York Times. Sarkozy isn't alone in bringing Christian symbolism into politics as mainstream European parties increasingly turn to the cross. The trend is especially pronounced on the right, where populism is being injected with Christianity. While the church and right-wing parties have long shared certain traditional views, the relatively new wave of populism is using Christianity as a tool.

"At the moment we are observing many right-wing politicians committing to Christianity as a cultural concept. This doesn't mean they are really religious. The right-wing reference is not a religious one but an abusive cultural access that only acts as a tool for distinction and racial exclusion," says Heribert Schiedel, an expert on right-wing politics and extremism at the Documentation Center of the

Austrian Resistance in Vienna.

Three years ago, Heinz-Christian Strache, the leader of Austria's far right Freedom Party, was photographed holding up a large crucifix during a speech. Not long after, Belgium's Vlaams Belang party called for an EU-wide referendum to ban minarets. The 19-year-old daughter of party leader Filip de Winter, An-Sofie, appeared on a party poster wearing a skimpy bikini beneath an open burka.

Parties are using headline-grabbing publicity stunts, often turning to Christian symbolism and Islamophobia. The messages frequently find an eager home in the media.

"Tabloid press reacts exceedingly strong on populist campaign strategies like the emotionalizing or personalizing of certain conflicts," says Joerg Matthes, a communications professor at the University of Zurich. "In this way national-conservative parties gain more attention than by classic argumentative campaign speeches."

TAKING GOD OUT OF THE EQUATION

The ultraconservative Catholic group Opus Dei has a reputation for secrecy and close associations with right-wing politics, including

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HERIBERT SCHIEDEL, DOCUMENTATION
CENTER OF THE AUSTRIAN RESISTANCE.

Rick Santorum, a conservative Republican who dropped out of the American presidential race in April. The Rev. Christian Spalek, a leader in Austria's Catholic Church and a member of Opus Dei, says religion has a place in politics and that he doesn't see a problem with parties like with Freedom Party or Vlaams Belang adopting Christian ideals, as long as they don't abuse them. But he says right-wing parties are doing just that.

"The crucifix is a plus sign," Spalek says. "It links heaven to Earth and people, and shouldn't be stolen by politics. Religion is more than an ideological construct."

The Freedom Party has made it front and center. Its campaign slogan "Occident in Christian hand" rhymes in German and has become a well-known catchphrase in the right-populist milieu of Central Europe. The Catholic Church condemned it.

What started as a slogan for one right-wing party currently frames the major target of many right-wing groups. While international cooperation has been difficult for them, in the past they are now unified by a mutual cause: protecting Europe from what they characterize as the danger of Islam.

Some right-wing groups go further than just anti-Muslim



BELGIUM'S VLAAMS BELANG PARTY PUSHED FOR A REFERENDUM TO BAN MINARETS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION.

rhetoric. In Hungary, the ruling conservative Fidesz party pushed through a law in 2011 that among other things stripped the Muslim community's status as a legally recognized religion. Those still recognized were what were deemed "historical churches," particularly the Catholic, the Evangelical, the Orthodox Church and Judaism. Most of the remaining government-funded churches were noticeably Christian or Christian-related. Many EU countries immediately condemned the law, and in 2012 Hungary's parliament voted to recognize an additional 17 churches, including the Muslim community. Though Hungarian Muslims regained their status, they were left humiliated.

"It was a clear signal," says a lawyer and Fidesz supporter with close ties to the party, speaking on the condition of anonymity because talking publicly might damage his reputation. "I think the law was partly enacted to tell Muslims and other inappropriate groups to subordinate or to go home."

The lawyer says he sees Islam as such a threat because its tenets also extend to practical, everyday matters, including the law.

"A fact mostly ignored by left parties is that you can't separate the personal religious practice from

Islam as a social system. That's why we have to keep to our Christian values to defend our society from Muslim infiltration."

THE LINE BETWEEN US, THEM Schiedel, the expert on right-wing politics and extremism, argues that right-wing populism aims to create a united, homogeneous society that's threatened from the outside, drawing a clear line between who's in and who's out. Anders Breivik, who massacred 69 people at a Norwegian youth camp and eight others in a bombing in 2011, argued at his trial that his killings were a "preventative strike ... on behalf of my people, my city, my country."

His 1,500-page manifesto lashes out against Islam and details his vision of cultural Christianity: "If you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and God then you are a religious Christian. Myself and many more like me do not necessarily have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and God. We do however believe in Christianity as a cultural, social, identity and moral platform. This makes us Christian," he writes. That idea is wide-spread among Europe's far-right politicians.

Mathias Venier, a 27-year-old member of the far-right Austrian

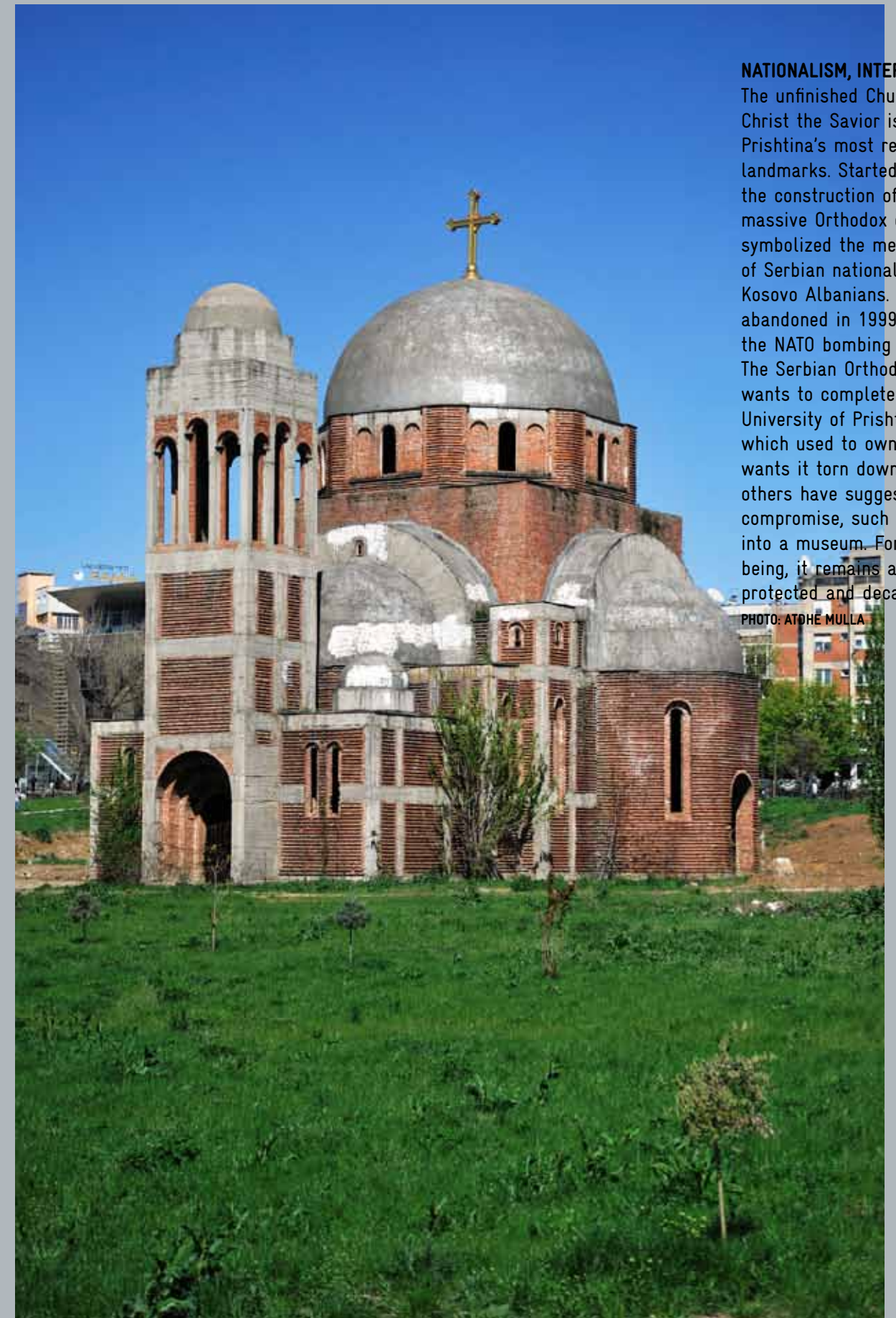
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THE REV. CHRISTIAN SPALEK, AUSTRIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH LEADER.

Freedom Party, became the youngest member of Austria's Parliament in 2011. Venier grew up in a rural part of Austria, where his parents own a gas station. Venier says he entered national politics out of frustration over his government's immigration policies and devotion to the European Union. For him, to be a Christian is not about spirituality or ideology; it represents something essential about being European. "The word expresses a cultural and mental imprinting of a nation," Venier says.

"Europe was embossed with Christianity and Judaism. Together with the Enlightenment, they established a mental and cultural base that must be protected from external interference in any case. There was no Enlightenment in Mohammedanism," the young politician adds, using an archaic word for Islam that's offensive to many Muslims. — K

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NATIONALISM, INTERRUPTED
The unfinished Church of Christ the Savior is one of Prishtina's most recognizable landmarks. Started in 1995, the construction of the massive Orthodox church symbolized the menace of Serbian nationalism to Kosovo Albanians. It was abandoned in 1999 during the NATO bombing campaign. The Serbian Orthodox Church wants to complete it. The University of Prishtina, which used to own the land, wants it torn down. While others have suggested a compromise, such as turning into a museum. For the time being, it remains as is — protected and decaying.

PHOTO: ATOHE MULLA

05
SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH