

# Theology, Religious Freedom and Populism

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I'd like to begin by quoting the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, who is also a Visiting Fellow of Cumberland Lodge:

Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it; so the proverb goes. After rather more than half a century of relative peace and the prevalence of liberal democracy in most states, Europe is in danger of forgetting that this political vision did not come from nowhere and did not survive without passionate and costly struggle.<sup>1</sup>

The world in which all of us here have grown up in has been shaped to a considerable extent by the two world wars of the twentieth century – wars that were largely the consequence of political tensions within Europe.

The international settlement after the First World War didn't stabilise Europe. The Treaty of Versailles caused more problems, by making Germany take all the blame for what happened, and punishing Germany economically.

The international settlement after the Second World War took a very different approach - lessons from the past had been learned. The way Germany was treated now might be termed 'help to flourish, not punish', and huge efforts were made to improve international co-operation to ensure peace and stability.

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Newell and Rob Thompson (eds.) *Moral and Spiritual Dilemmas in Challenging Times: a Study Guide to Darkness over Germany: A warning from history* by E. Amy Buller, (Cumberland Lodge and the Council for Christians and Jews, 2018) p. 7.  
<https://www.cumberlandlodge.ac.uk/sites/default/files/public/Moral%20and%20Spiritual%20Dilemmas%20in%20Challenging%20Times.pdf>

The Bretton-Woods Conference in July 1944, involving 44 allied nations, paved the way for greater economic co-operation: by an international commercial and monetary agreement, and by setting up the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank).

The United Nations (UN) was established by 51 countries on 24 October 1945, replacing the ineffective League of Nations. In its General Assembly in Paris in December 1948, it adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which, of course, includes Article 18:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

The United States was, of course, a key player in established the UN, IMF and World Bank.

In Europe, the European Coal and Steel Community was established in 1950 by six countries, which, following the 1957 Treaty of Rome became the European Economic Community (EEC), which continued to expand its membership and function and become the European Union (EU).

So, since the Second World War the name of the game has been international co-operation – economically, politically and legally. This was born out of the lessons of recent history, and both the USA and European countries led the way.

Of course, this post-war world order is far from perfect. The UN has never lived up to its lofty principles, and some of its member states pay lip service to, or ignore, Article 18. The World Bank hasn't eliminated global poverty, and the IMF hasn't prevented economic crises. And, as we all know, the EU is far from perfect. Trying to ensure nations co-operate and help each other is extremely difficult.

Yet however imperfect this world order is, it's just about held together – until now. What we seem to be witnessing at present is an unravelling of what was built-up in the aftermath of the Second World War. The USA, under Donald Trump, is taking an isolationist stance, and the EU is under great strain with Brexit and pressure from various member states.

Why is this? That's something we might discuss later. But common factors seems to be: a widespread disillusionment with leadership, a reaction against international co-operation, and a sense that things could somehow be better if there's a change to the way things are run. It may be impossible to give populism a precise definition, but these three things seem to be 'populist' in nature.

Populism is something of a dirty word – but it isn't necessarily bad. It emerges when there's a grievance in society which those in power are unable or unwilling to address – and so people seek other means of bringing about change.

Populism today relates to genuine grievances. In the UK, for example, following the banking crisis we've seen average real wages decrease and public services reduced through austerity measures, but also income inequality increasing with the very wealthy becoming even wealthier. I would hazard a guess that if these things hadn't happened, nor would Brexit.

There are examples of what we might term 'good' populism. I would suggest that the Solidarity movement in Poland is an example of this. Strongly supported by the Roman Catholic Church, it came to power by circumventing the Communist government, and it had a domino-effect in bringing down Communism in Eastern Europe and replacing it with something more democratic.

The problem with populism, then, isn't that it's a response to real grievances - it's when these grievances are used to break down the structures that hold society together effectively, and it's when they're use to dehumanise - or even demonise - others.

Populism can create a political vacuum, and what's crucial is what fills the vacuum. We saw with the Arab Spring how populism – helped considerably by social media - created a vacuum which extremists have been quick to exploit. What began with optimism has turned out – not least in Syria – as a complete disaster.

National Socialism in 1930s Germany is, arguably, the prime example of 'bad' populism. There were genuine grievances in Germany, which brought Hitler to power, and in the process society broke down with devastating consequences. Nazi leaders were skilled at projecting the causes of society's ills onto Jews and others perceived to be outsiders and undesirable: Roma people, the disabled, homosexuals. The Nazis also set up a shadow police force – the SS – and a shadow Ministry for Foreign Affairs – run by von Ribbentrop, to get around the normal structures. We know the consequences.

In the 1930s, a remarkable English woman called Amy Buller visited Germany extensively, and took delegations of British academics – economists, political scientists, educationalists, and theologians – to have discussions with Nazi leaders, including von Ribbentrop. She also met many ordinary Germans, and wrote a fascinating book about these encounters.

The book's called *Darkness over Germany*, and I'd like now to read you a passage from it. This passage describes a conversation between Amy Buller and Wilhelm, a Nazi officer whom Amy Buller had previously known as a doctoral student. They're discussing the delegations of British academics that Amy Buller brought to Germany in the 1930s to meet Nazi leaders.

We ordered our coffee and Wilhelm enquired eagerly, 'Who were the British group of educationalists you took to Berlin and who were the lecturers on the Nazi side?'

I showed him the programme, and when he had glanced at it he said, 'Tell me, did your people see something of the inspiration of the philosophy of our new movement in Germany?'

To which I replied: 'Wilhelm, how can you ask me that? It is a rotten philosophy and those of us who know and love Germany felt humiliated that a country so famed for scholarship should have such second-rate people teaching in your universities.'

Almost angrily he replied, 'Oh, you have grown so old in your country that you do not know new wine when it is there.'

'Old wine or new wine, it is rotten, Wilhelm, and not only am I distressed for your country that many are being misled, but I cannot think what you are doing to your mind, if you allow yourself to accept such stuff as that.'

There was silence for a time, and I realised that Wilhelm was almost too deeply moved to speak. When he did, his face was pale, as he turned to me, and said very quietly, 'For God's sake, don't raise any further conflict for me'...

'...I was introduced to Hitler. You won't understand and I cannot explain either because I don't know what happened, but life for me took on a tremendous new significance. After all, Germany would rise again; after all, I was wanted. I have since committed myself, body, soul and spirit, to this movement for the resurrection of Germany. I can only tell you that I cannot go back, I cannot question, I am pledged. I beg you not to try to set up conflict in my mind. I dare not let that happen for I am as much committed to Hitler as the fundamentalist is to the Bible. Believe me, I cannot face uncertainly and conflict again. No, for me it is Hitler and the resurrection of Germany on one side, or suicide on the other. I have chosen Hitler, leave me in peace with my choice.'<sup>2</sup>

Buller believed National Socialism touched people in a deep way, akin to a religious faith. There were three key elements to this. First of all, she saw Hitler as a saviour figure. She didn't think this 'ugly ill-shapen Austrian painter with the raucous voice', as she described him, was personally charismatic. However, she believed that he

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<sup>2</sup> E. Amy Buller, *Darkness over Germany: A warning from history*, (London: Arcadia Books, 2018), pp. 130-31.

embodied the hopes and aspirations of ordinary Germans during their troubled times. People have said similar things about Donald Trump.

Second, she noted that National Socialism, like a religion, was ideological. It had a clear sense of its own identity - with an almost religious sense of nationhood - and in practical terms it offered meaning and purpose by providing jobs and an antidote to the Great Depression – something many saw as a Christian response to the evils of the day.

And third, she observed that National Socialists reinforced the ideology and the idea of Hitler as a saviour by using quasi-religious rituals. In the original version of *Darkness over Germany*, but unfortunately not in the new edition, she includes a litany of labour held at Nuremburg which, for all intents and purposes, is a religious service complete with vows, confession, act of remembrance and ends with this song, or hymn:

God bless our labour and our efforts  
God bless the Führer and this hour,  
God help us to reclaim the land,  
To serve the Reich with deep devotion,  
May we be ready evermore.  
God bless our labour and our efforts  
God bless our spades with shining blades,  
God bless our work: make it successful,  
That every blow struck with the spades  
May be a prayer for Germany.<sup>3</sup>

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Religion is, sadly, more often than not seen to be part of the ills of society. Religion is powerful, and can certainly be hijacked or abused. A researcher at Cambridge University, Tobias Cremer, recently wrote an article about how right wing movements

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<sup>3</sup> E. Amy Buller, *Darkness over Germany*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1945) p. 176.

in Europe are claiming to be guardians of Christianity, against the supposed religious and cultural threat posed by migrants of other faiths.<sup>4</sup>

While Islam is being exploited by extremists today, we shouldn't forget that in 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland, divisions were drawn up between Catholics and Protestants and many people lost their lives as a result. We don't have to scratch too far beneath the surface for these tribal divisions to re-emerge, which is a real worry as we try to work out what sort of a border's required between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland after Brexit.

While religion can be perverted by power and vested interests, it is – and should be – a force for good. A religious faith should motivate us to care for one another. It should call us to act sacrificially towards others. It should make us put others before ourselves. It should help us regard all human beings as God's creation, perhaps even made in the image of God.

These are very simple core principles at the heart of many religions. If people of faith – by which I mean over 80 per cent of the world's population – truly live by these principles, what a difference it would make!

So what can we do? I'd like to suggest two things. First, to ensure that an articulate and informed religious voice is heard loud and clear about the issues we now face. We need religious leaders to speak up and challenge those views which are out of kilter with the principles I've just mentioned.

Second, we need all people of faith to take the issues facing the world seriously, and engage with them. To do so, faith communities should help their members better understand the issues of the day through the lens of faith, and to discuss them.

For this reason, Cumberland Lodge has worked with the Council for Christians and Jews to produce a study guide to *Darkness over Germany*. It's called *Moral and*

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<sup>4</sup> Tobias Cremer, 'Defenders of the faith: why right-wing populists are embracing religion' New Statesman 30 May 2018, <https://www.newstatesman.com/2018/05/defenders-faith-0>

*Spiritual Dilemmas in Challenging Times*, and it's designed to help us reflect on what's happening today using the lessons of the past.

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I'd like to end by quoting from a speech made nearly four years ago in the UK Parliament, in a debate initiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury on the subject of 'Soft Power and Conflict Prevention'. During the debate, Lord Ramsbotham, rose to his feet and said this:

I have been thinking about the youth of this country. I took from my bookshelf a very remarkable book written by a godmother of mine, Amy Buller. It is called *Darkness over Germany* and it was written during the war. It explains the almost religious grip that Nazism had over the youth of Germany...<sup>5</sup>

All of us want meaning and purpose in our lives. All of us need a moral compass to guide us. All of us want, at the very deepest level, a sense of security. These are what religions – and false religions – can offer.

In these challenging times, all these basic needs can be met. They can be met in ways that bind us together positively; or they can be met in ways that cause great harm. We need to ensure that we do all we can to ensure it's the former, not the latter. Thank you.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2014-12-05/debates/14120531000468/SoftPowerAndConflictPrevention?highlight=amy%20buller#contribution-14120531000269>