

The Bible in Migration Politics in Northern Europe

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This article analyses references to the Bible in recent migration politics in Northern European countries, to understand how and why the Bible is used in the context of political discussions about refugees, migration, and Islam. By examining a number of cases, we will see how biblical texts and themes are brought in to support political claims about Christian identity and values. Yet the focus of this article is framed by a broader question which stems from the observation in recent scholarship that in many “Western” countries, Christianity is no longer presented as primarily religious, but instead is seen as mainly cultural and historical. The question for biblical scholarship is: what happens to the Bible in such a transition in the perception of Christianity? Or put in another way: how can engagements with the Bible serve as a lens to give insight into this transition from religion to culture?

The changing social landscape in many Western, especially Northern European, countries over the last decades has resulted in a noteworthy shift around and within Christianity. The most important aspect of this social change lies in the fact that people in these countries increasingly self-describe as non-religious and that connected to this, there is a decline in affiliation with organized religion, particularly Christianity, with a much-reduced number of people regularly participating in religious services and rituals. A second significant social factor is the increased re-

ligious diversity and growth of minority religions, especially Islam, in part as a result of migration to Europe.¹

The transition from religion to culture in this context is evident in the fact that ideas and practices associated with Christianity do not necessarily disappear, even when people no longer identify as Christian or as religious to the same extent as before. Instead, what we see is that these ideas and practices are given a different significance. The sociologist Jay Demerath uses the term “cultural religion” to describe what he calls a European “syndrome,” “by which religion affords a sense of personal identity and continuity with the past even after participation in ritual and belief have lapsed.”² According to Lori Beaman, whose work on religious change is central to this article, these factors have created “the context within which a reshaping of previously (and arguably still) hegemonic religion is being recast as culture and as vital to the heritage of some countries.” When recent social and religious changes lead to fear, Beaman argues, one of the responses is ...

... the insistence that practices previously understood as being religious constitute a crucial part of culture and are thus effectively exempt from human rights frameworks related to religion that might curtail their presence.³

A well-known example of this, is the verdict in the case *Lautsi v. Italy*, decided by the European Court of Human Rights in 2011. According to this verdict, the cross may be considered controversial in a state

¹ For numbers on these developments, see the report from the Pew Research Center “Being Christian in Western Europe” which came out in 2018 (<https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe/>); also the data from the Swiss Metadatabase of Religious Affiliation in Europe (<https://www.smre-data.ch/en/>).

² N. Jay Demerath, “The rise of ‘cultural religion’ in European Christianity: Learning from Poland, Northern Ireland, and Sweden,” *Social Compass* 47/1 (2000): 127–139 (127).

³ Lori Beaman, *The Transition of Religion to Culture in Law and Public Discourse* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 3–5; see also Avi Astor and Damon Mayrl, “Culturalized Religion: A Synthetic Review and Agenda for Research,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59/2 (2020): 209–226.

school as a religious symbol, but if it is taken as a cultural “humanist” symbol, it does not infringe on anyone’s freedom and is believed to evoke a shared identity.⁴

Beaman sees this cloaking of religion as culture as a defensive or protective strategy: a way to continue certain practices and views by making them exempt from the challenge that freedom of religion poses, which at least in theory protects all religions—majority and minority—equally, and places them on a level playing field.⁵ The move from religion to culture is a response to increased plurality and the safeguarding of religious freedom. It tilts the playing field back in favour of the majority. No religion can claim superiority, but culture and heritage can claim a special, protected position, especially in a national context. Framing religion as culture and heritage protects it both from other religions and from the non-religious as well. The idea of the past, of heritage, is thus an important component in this reconceived cultural Christianity.

RELIGION, CULTURE, AND THE BIBLE

Given this transition and the significance of the past, certain questions present themselves in the context of our field: what happens to the Bible in this development? Is the Bible reconfigured along with Christianity? Is it now considered to be a significant aspect of Christian heritage, or does it simply become a thing of the past? Unfortunately, scholars who work on the topic of social and cultural change in religion generally do not seem to pay much attention to the Bible, and scholars of the Bible generally do not focus on these kinds of recent develop-

⁴ The full verdict in the case can be found here [https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{"dmdocnumber":\["857725"\],"itemid":\["001-95589"\]}](https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{). For a discussion, see Lori Beaman, “Battles Over Symbols: The ‘Religion’ Of the Minority Versus the ‘Culture’ Of the Majority,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 28/1 (2013): 67–104; also Astor and Mayrl “Culturalized Religion,” 215.

⁵ Beaman, *The Transition of Religion to Culture*, 3–5.

ments. This lack of attention for how this transition might affect the Bible and how a study of the Bible might help us to understand it, constitutes a missed opportunity, both for understanding the role of the Bible in contemporary culture, and for using the Bible as a lens to get a better sense of the changes connected to Christianity and culture.

There are clear indications that the Bible too is being transformed discursively as well as materially from a religious text to a cultural and national icon. Particularly in (post-)Protestant countries—I focus here on Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Germany, where we can assume the Bible to have an important role in configurations of Christianity—the Bible is an obvious focus when exploring religious change.

One of the areas where we can see this transformation happening is in recent Bible translation and production, where the Bible is increasingly presented as national text, for example in Denmark and the Netherlands. The language used to promote new Bible translations is indicative here. Upon launching a new Dutch translation in the autumn of 2021, Rieuwerd Buitenwerf, the director of the Dutch-Flemish Bible Society, described the Bible as “the source of Jewish and Christian faith traditions,” which is “also of great significance for our culture.”⁶ The press release of the Danish Bible Society on the publication of *Bibelen 2020* had a similar tone, declaring that “All of Denmark gets a new Bible” and describing biblical stories as “foundational stories in our culture.”⁷

There is an explicit attempt here to broaden the audience for new Bible translations beyond Christians to anyone who is part of “our culture.” New translations are deliberately produced and promoted to ap-

⁶ See the news report on the website of the Dutch-Flemish Bible Society (<https://www.bijbelgenootschap.nl/nieuws/koning-neemt-nieuwe-bijbel-in-ontvangst/>). Translations that occur in this article from Swedish, Danish, and Dutch are my own throughout.

⁷ Thomas Godsk Larsen, “Hele Danmark får ny Bibel,” *Bibelskabet* (October 10, 2019). Online: <https://www.bibelskabet.dk/hele-danmark-faar-en-ny-bibel>.

peal to a national identity and a national audience, for example by including famous authors in translation teams.⁸ Looking at the transition from religion to culture through Bible production is thus potentially highly informative.

A second topic to explore to see how this transition is taking place would be to look at the academic study of the Bible. Secular governments of Northern European countries fund the study this particular book under fairly unique circumstances. There is no other corpus of texts that is studied in this way, that has its own field and the status that comes with it. The theme of the 2021 annual meeting of the Swedish Exegetical Society was “Bibeln i politiken,” and can be seen as part of a growing interest in the afterlives of biblical texts. It is important to note, however, that the type of research that focusses on biblical reception does not represent the mainstream of biblical scholarship. There is a reason why some people have called this reception approach “biblical studies on holiday” or use other pejorative descriptions.⁹ In the hierarchy of our field, it tends to rank below research that is focussed on a supposed original meaning, or on interpretations that at least derive from knowledge related to the time of the text’s origin.

In my own field, that of Pauline studies, scholars are still mainly concerned with trying to understand what Paul actually thought and meant, and if a scholar develops a new reading of a Pauline text—one that therefore by definition has had zero influence in the subsequent history of Paul as a religious and cultural figure—that is what will most likely get them published in a high-ranking journal. The field does not

⁸ This process is discussed in more detail in Karin Neutel and Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, “‘God Speaks Our Language’: Recent Scandinavian Bible Translations and the Heritagization of Christianity,” in *The Nordic Bible*, ed. Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Outi Lehtipuu and Kasper Bro Larsen (Berlin: de Gruyter, forthcoming 2022).

⁹ Susan Gillingham, “Biblical Studies on Holiday? A Personal View of Reception History,” in *Reception History and Biblical Studies: Theory and Practice*, ed. Emma England and William J. Lyons (LHBOTS, 6; London: T&T Clark, 2015), 17–30.

primarily reward research on interpretations of Paul that have been historically significant, but rather places the highest value on meanings that have not yet been discovered. Biblical studies in its dominant form therefore assumes and in turn reinforces the status of the Bible as relevant in some essential sense—as containing meaning that it is still worth extracting in new ways today, by scholars specifically trained and employed for this purpose.

Mapping changes in biblical studies in light of the shift from religion to culture, and understanding the position of Northern European scholarship within the global field, would be another valuable angle to studying this shift. In addition, examining the way in which biblical studies itself contributes to the status of the Bible as a cultural and national text in the European context, would add significantly to our understanding of these processes.

ANTI-MIGRATION POLITICS IN NORTHERN EUROPE

I leave these two topics for now, and focus in the main part of this paper on the third topic that is relevant for connecting the Bible to the shift from religion to culture: political discourse. Across all Northern European countries, political views that are critical of or hostile to migration and Islam have embraced the idea that Europe as a whole and their own countries specifically are, and should in some way remain, Christian. These political views are therefore part of the transition from religion to culture and the investment in heritage and the past, and can shed light on it in significant ways.

The fact that this claim, that Europe has a specifically Christian identity, is so widely shared, is a rather surprising development, particularly for Northern European countries. These countries and their political discourses are often seen as highly secularised, and this is also how they tend to see themselves, at least until recently.¹⁰

¹⁰ On Christian anti-migration politics and secularism, see, e.g., Daniel Nilsson

We can easily imagine it having gone another way: that nativist politics would proudly present national or Northern European identity as having moved beyond religion, no longer needing its delusions about reality, unlike other people in other places. We do encounter this idea to some extent, but for the main part, politicians who run on a platform focussed on opposition to migration, in whatever form, have chosen to emphasize the continuing significance of Europe's Christian past.

An important element in this nativist rhetoric is the idea that Europe's Christian identity is incompatible with, and threatened by Islam, and therefore needs to be defended and strengthened against it. The increased "Muslimisation" of immigrants—the idea that the only feature of migrants that is relevant, from a majority perspective, is the religious affiliation attributed to them—now seems to go hand in hand with an increased "Christianisation" of European self-understanding.¹¹ This polemic seems to be preferred to the alternative option of opposing Islam to the absence of religion.

Before turning to this rhetoric in more detail and discussing three cases in which reference is made to the Bible, we will briefly look at the state of scholarship on Christian identity in migration politics, because here we see an interesting tension with the shift from religion to culture that we explored above. Current scholarship, mainly in the field of Political Science has a great interest in this topic of anti-migration politics,

DeHanas, and Marat Shterin, "Religion and the Rise of Populism," *Religion, State & Society* 46/3 (2018): 177–185; Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, and Olivier Roy (eds.), *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion* (London: Hurst & Company, 2016); Kathleen A. Montgomery and Ryan Winter, "Explaining the Religion Gap in Support for Radical Right Parties in Europe," *Politics and Religion* 8 (2015): 379–403; Efe Peker, "Finding Religion: Immigration and the Populist (Re)Discovery of Christian Heritage in Western and Northern Europe," *Religions* 13 (2022): 158; David Thurfjell, *Det gudlösa folket: De postkristna svenskarna och religionen* (Stockholm: Norstedts 2019).

¹¹ W. Schiffauer, "Der unheimliche Muslim: Staatsbürgerschaft und zivilgesellschaftliche Ängste," in *Konfliktfeld Islam in Europa*, ed. L. Tezcan and M. Wohlrab-Sahr (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2007), 111–134.

but it tends to analyse nativist Christian discourse by looking at how it compares to other political and social perspectives that present themselves as Christian, particularly those of established Christian political parties and of churches.

In doing so, they make a distinction between “Christendom,” which is considered to be focussed on “belonging,” and concerned primarily with identity and territory, and “Christianity” which is understood as actual Christian faith, which centres on “belief.” “Christendom” and “belonging” are seen as the domain of nationalist politics, whereas “Christianity” and “belief” are represented by the mainstream churches and traditional Christian political parties and their greater openness towards migration.¹² The current consensus among political scientists appears to be that appeals to Christianity in anti-migration politics are predominantly rhetorical and instrumental.¹³ Scholars speak of a “high jacking” of religion, and of “Christianism” which is secularism in disguise and should be distinguished from “real” European Christianity.¹⁴

There seems to be some overlap in the distinction that political scientists make between Christendom and Christianity on the one hand, and the transition from religion to culture on the other. However, where

¹² This distinction informs the analysis of many studies, e.g., Tobias Cremer, “The Religion Gap: Why Right-wing Populists Underperform Among Christian Voters and What This Means for the Role of the Church in Society,” *LSE Religion and Global Society Blog* (December 2018). Online: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2018/12/the-religion-gap-why-right-wing-populists-underperform-among-christian-voters-and-what-this-means-for-the-role-of-the-church-in-society>; Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy, *Saving the People*; Olivier Roy, *L'Europe est-elle chrétienne?* (Paris: Seuil, 2019).

¹³ Daniel Coyne, “Populism and Religion: A Conclusion,” *LSE Religion and Global Society Blog* (February 2019). Online: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/religionglobalsociety/2019/02/populism-and-religion-a-conclusion>; DeHanas and Marat Shterin, “Religion and the Rise of Populism”; Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy, *Saving the People*; Roy *L'Europe est-elle chrétienne?*.

¹⁴ These characterisations occur in Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy, *Saving the People*; Rogers Brubaker, “A New ‘Christianist’ Secularism in Europe,” *The Immanent Frame* (October 2016); DeHanas and Shterin, “Religion and the Rise of Populism.”

the shift is seen by scholars of religion as a development over time, political scientists use the distinction Christendom–Christianity to make a normative evaluation of different political expressions. They tend to consider “Christianity” to be more legitimate than “Christendom,” and see “Christendom” as using the legitimacy of “Christianity” to increase its own.

There are several reasons to push beyond this focus on sincerity or legitimacy, and the distinction between belonging and belief. The main reason for why this distinction does not work is that politicians who use appeals to Christianity, certainly in Northern Europe, do not necessarily present themselves as pious Christians, whose deception can be exposed.

In a victory speech after the provincial elections in 2019, the leader of the Dutch party Forum for Democracy (FvD), Thierry Baudet, declared: “We know that you do not have to accept the metaphysical foundations of Christianity, to accept the idea of the resurrection as the leading motif of Western civilisation.”¹⁵ Baudet argued in his speech that Christian faith is not required to acknowledge that the central creed of Christianity is the essence of the West and that the West is the very best civilisation.

Geert Wilders, the leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) said something similar resulting in much hilarity in a session of the Dutch parliament in 2015. When asked what the Christian values were that he frequently refers to, he explained that one of these values is to stand up for your own people and prevent islamization. “What could be more Christian than to make sure that the Netherlands keeps its Christian values?” “You can represent Christian values when you are no longer a Christian. Millions of people in the Netherlands do this.”¹⁶ Presenting Christianity not as a matter of faith, but rather as civilisation and values,

¹⁵ The full speech can be accessed online here: <https://www.trouw.nl/nieuws/spreek-tekst-thierry-baudet-verkiezingsavond-20-maart-2019-be2a1539/>.

¹⁶ *Algemene Politieke Beschouwingen* (16 September, 2015). Online: https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/plenaire_verslagen/detail/2015-2016/2.

can therefore be an open strategy, rather than a form of deception or veiled legitimization, as scholars often assume.

NEIGHBOURLY LOVE AND MIGRATION

We now turn to how the Bible is used in the context of these debates and what looking at the Bible can add to our understanding of how Christianity, culture, and the past are shaped. There are a number of different texts that are referenced in these debates, for example the command to give to the emperor what is the emperor's, or Paul's statement about Jew and Greek in Gal 3:28, but I will focus here on another recurring biblical theme, that of the neighbourly love and the parable of the Good Samaritan which occurs in Luke 10.

Perhaps surprisingly, references to the idea of the neighbour and neighbourly love are used in this political context as an argument *against* welcoming migrants to Northern Europe. Cases from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Germany where politicians refer to this theme show a number of interesting patterns.¹⁷

¹⁷ These cases occur in texts written by politicians, see e.g., Beatrix Von Storch, "Grüßwort von Beatrix van Storch, MdB," in *Bekentnisse von Christen in der Alternative für Deutschland*, ed. Joachim Kuhs (Graz: Oxalis-Verlag, 2018), 11–13; Felix Dietsch, Volker Münz, and Thomas Wawerka (eds.), *Rechtes Christentum? Der Glaube im Spannungsfeld von nationaler Identität, Populismus und Humanitätsgedanken* (Graz: Ares Verlag, 2018), as well as in speeches and interviews, see, e.g., Thierry Baudet of the Dutch Forum for Democracy in a parliamentary discussion (Online: https://www.tw.eedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/plenaire_verlagen/kamer_in_het_kort/kamer-bespreekt-pact-van-marrakesh); Sylvi Listhaug of the Norwegian Progress Party in an NRK radio program *Politisk kvarter* ("Political Quarter." Online: <https://radio.nrk.no/serie/politisk-kvarter/NREP37022917/09-08-2017>); and Marie Krarup of the Danish People's Party in the Danish newspaper *Kristeligt Dagblad* (October 2, 2015) "Gælder buddet om næstekærlighed kun vores naboer?." Several of these cases are discussed in Karin B. Neutel and Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, "Neighbours Near and Far: How a Biblical Figure is Used in Recent European Anti-Migration Politics," *BibInt* 29/3 (2021): 358–380.

The first is that they almost all enter into a polemic with interpretations of neighbourly love that are used by their political opponents. There is a sense that neighbourly love is already significant in connection with migration, but that it is misunderstood or misapplied. The polemic is directed against neighbourly love as supporting “the left” or the “irresponsible” welcoming of migrants that has no eye for the ensuing consequences. This is the understanding of neighbourly love that is presumed in the sources and that they aim to oppose or undermine. In this way, these sources suggest that there is actual political value in having “neighbourly love” on your side. It is worth fighting over who gets to “own” neighbourly love politically.

The strategies used in this argument vary, but one recurring approach is to redefine who counts as the neighbour. Unlike English, all languages in these countries have a specifically “biblical,” or Christian sounding word for “neighbour” (“nästa” in Swedish, “neste” in Norwegian, “næste” in Danish, “naaste” in Dutch, and “Nächste” in German), and a different word for the person who lives next door. The broadness of the English term “neighbour” seems to have influenced the understanding of the biblical word “nästa” and its equivalents in other languages, and in several cases ideas of physical closeness, or physical neighbours, are brought into the interpretation of neighbourly love. This strategy allows the focus of neighbourly love to shift towards loving people who are geographically close.¹⁸

Another strategy that is used is to give specific meaning to aspects of the parable of the Good Samaritan, arguing for example that the fact that the Samaritan brings the victim to the local inn, rather than taking him home with him, supports the policy of helping refugees in their home region, rather than accepting them into Northern Europe.¹⁹

¹⁸ This happens for example in the reference to neighbourly love in Thierry Baudet’s parliamentary remarks and in Sylvi Listhaug’s radio interview, see above.

¹⁹ Beatrix von Storch makes the most detailed argument along these lines, see Von Storch, “Grußwort,” 12–13.

There are also interpretations that reject the idea that neighbourly love can inform political policy. In these cases, while neighbourly love is still seen as supporting the political view that is critical of migration, it is thought to apply as an ethical principle only to individuals, not to the state. It is still seen as important to understand neighbourly love correctly—i.e. not as their opponents do—but it should not be the basis for politics.²⁰

THREE CASES OF NEIGHBOURLY LOVE: SWEDEN

We will now examine three cases more closely—from Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands—to see in detail how these arguments are made and how neighbourly love is interpreted. The first case comes from a blog post written in 2012 by Mattias Karlsson, then a member of parliament for the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD).²¹ According to his own introduction, Karlsson writes the blog to argue for the legitimacy of a conservative, nationalist view within the Church of Sweden:

... to show that, contrary to what the cultural radicals say, a Christian orientation with conservative and nationalist symbolism belongs within the Church of Sweden. There is no contradiction between the Christian faith, the Bible, and the traditions of the Church of Sweden on the one hand and a conservative and nationalist attitude towards society on the other. The nationalist position has been represented within the church for at least 600 years. The orientations that now have power within the church can hardly rest on a 100-year tradition.

In spite of what he sees as the leftist direction that the Church has taken, Karlsson does not want to give up on it since:

the Church of Sweden is a crucial part of our history and of our present. As previously mentioned, it is one of our nation's most important institutions. By

²⁰ Dietsch, Münz, and Wawerka (eds.), *Rechtes Christentum?*, 7–8.

²¹ <https://sdkarlsson.wordpress.com/2012/04/06/identitetsdebatten-slutet-eller-eny-borjan-for-fadernas-kyrka/>. All quotes below are from this source.

virtue of this, it is also a bearer of a gigantic part of our cultural heritage and could become so to an even greater extent with another leadership.

What jumps out here is obviously the broad cultural and historical significance that is attributed to the Church, rather than a specifically Christian one. To support his case for the compatibility of conservative patriotism with Christianity, Karlsson then proceeds to interpret a number of biblical texts, tracing specific themes connected to plurality and diversity from Genesis to the Psalms, to Acts of the Apostles, via other texts to the books of the Maccabees, back to Exodus, Deuteronomy, and various other texts, and ending with Gal 3:28 and the parable of the Good Samaritan:

Finally, regarding Luke 10:25–37 and the parable of the Good Samaritan, I know that this biblical passage has also been used to legitimize unrestrained immigration and a general, naive, kindness. My view, however, is that this Bible quote should be interpreted in a more sober way.

That one should help people who are in need and seriously ill, no matter what ethnic group they belong to, is of course something I agree with. This is also the reason why SD advocates a refugee policy with a focus on help in the local area, which in practice would help many more people than the current counterproductive mass immigration policy. This is also the reason why SD wants Sweden, as one of the few countries in the world, to have responsible, but generous development assistance that is in line with the UN's recommendations.

The fact that the Good Samaritan in the present example helped the injured man by paying an innkeeper to take care of him until he recovered instead of taking the injured man to his own home and letting him live there for the rest of his life, also suggests that the Sweden Democrats' refugee policy is closer to the actions of the Good Samaritan than what the proponents of mass immigration do.

As for the central and previously mentioned commandment to "love your neighbour as yourself," it may be worth mentioning that God comes first in this commandment. Furthermore, the current Bible quote provides valuable information on how to interpret this commandment. This is because it gives us a definition of who is our neighbour. Many, especially multiculturalists and advocates of mass immigration, interpret the word "neighbour" to mean all people without exception. Through the example of the Good Samaritan, however, we learn that Jesus' own definition of the word can be said to be "he who shows me

mercy.” Based on this definition, as a Christian I should not be obliged to love all people as myself but only those who show me mercy. The definition of mercy must, in turn, vary from person to person. In my opinion, for example, it is not a manifestation of mercy to come to someone else’s country, a country that this person loves, and demand that it be turned into something unrecognizable. In my opinion, for example, advocating a literal interpretation of the Qur’an is not a manifestation of mercy. In my opinion, advocating or using violence against other people is not a manifestation of mercy. Thus, according to the definition of “neighbour” given in Luke 10:25–37, I should not be required to love Islamists, murderers, paedophiles, and political extremists, as myself.

We see a number of the characteristics of the source material described above in this particular case: there is an already existing interpretation of neighbourly love used to support welcoming migrants which is challenged through this reading. A different attitude to migration, one focussed on a local solution, is presented as the proper understanding of neighbourly love, and as an even a better following of the example of the Good Samaritan. Certain aspects of the story, such as paying the innkeeper, and the fact that the neighbour is defined as someone who shows mercy, are given specific meaning in the context of migration and Islam.

What is particularly interesting about Karlsson’s use of the Bible in this blog, is the way in which he actually has very modest or limited claims for his interpretations. He writes:

Of course, I am not a theologian or even a convinced believer. Based on my understanding of the biblical texts, however, I consider myself able to state that the Sweden Democrats’ church policy has at least as strong biblical support as the left theologians’ multi-religious, multicultural, and multi-sexual one. In a people’s church that claims to want to be broad and open to different Christian orientations, a conservative, patriotic orientation should thus be guaranteed a place.

It is apparently not Karlsson’s aim to offer the correct interpretation, but rather one that is also on the table; one that has at least as much credibility as that of his opponents. The goal is to ensure that his stance on migration and plurality also has a legitimate claim of having “biblical support.” There is a rather minimalist approach here, to show “no con-

tradiction” with Christianity and stay within the realm of biblical authority and thereby somehow the authority of the past and the legitimacy of cultural heritage. The goal is to show that his attitude is not something new, but something already familiar and established.

THREE CASES OF NEIGHBOURLY LOVE: DENMARK

The second case, from Denmark, comes from an article in the newspaper *Kristeligt Dagblad*, with the title “Does the command about neighbourly love only apply to our neighbour?”—the word for “neighbour” used here at the end of the title is “naboer,” someone who lives next door, rather than the biblical word “næste,” which occurs in the Danish term for neighbourly love “næstekærlighed.”²² Along with a number of other Danish public figures, Marie Krarup, member of parliament for the Danish People’s Party was asked about the meaning of neighbourly love in the context of migration.

In responses to this question, Krarup comes with an extensive reflection on what neighbourly love does and does not mean:

For me, the neighbour is the person who is close to me. I like the English Bible translation that uses the word “neighbour,” as in “person next door.” Someone I can see and touch. ... It is more important for me to love the neighbour in close relationships. Among other things, I show this by cooking for my children and giving my husband a kiss on the cheek. ... On the other hand, the people who help Syrian refugees are showing the exact opposite of neighbourly love. They take the inheritance of their children and give it to strangers. They destroy a free and rich Denmark by opening the country to people who have no claim whatsoever to be here. ... The Syrian refugees and children in Africa are not my neighbours. It would be crazy to demand that I love them, because I don’t know them. ... It is important for me to keep the Christian command of neighbourly love out of my political work. It is an ethical requirement for anyone to care for the person who is in front of you. Neighbourly love is to let Jesus work in you

²² Marie Krarup, “Gælder buddet om næstekærlighed kun vores naboer?”, *Kristeligt Dagblad* (October 2, 2015).

and do something for others. Therefore, the commandment is never addressed collectively to a group or a community. ... Many people believe that neighbourly love is found in left-wing welfare politics, where you take from the rich and give to the poor. That's because people today know less about what Christianity is. They think that neighbourly love is to vote for socialist parties that will abolish all borders and help the poor at the expense of the rich. I think that is rubbish. That is precisely why it cannot be put on a political program. There is no neighbourly love in politics and therefore no party can have a monopoly on neighbourly love.

Like Karlsson, Krarup is also involved in a polemic: neighbourly love does not mean welcoming refugees, as others claim. It does not mean loving Syrian refugees whom you do not know, because that does not make sense. She also ends up on a similarly low-stakes outcome for her particular view: “no party can have a monopoly on neighbourly love.” Apparently, she does not claim a monopoly for her own interpretation either, it is her personal reading of it. Through this personal angle, Krarup's interpretation shows much more ambivalence towards neighbourly love in connection with migration than that of Karlsson. She both claims it for her own perspective on family and society, but also rejects its use in a political context where it might support her policies. With an explicit reference to English Bible translation, Krarup defines the neighbour as physically close, familiar, and well-known. She emphasizes the individual nature of neighbourly love: it is not intended as a collective instruction. Neighbourly love means letting Jesus work “in you,” individually, rather than collectively. While there is a mention of Jesus, there is no interpretation of the parable from Luke here, no details about the Good Samaritan that are given meaning.

THREE CASES OF NEIGHBOURLY LOVE: THE NETHERLANDS

The third case is an op-ed article from the Netherlands titled “Blind neighbourly love can be recipe for political disintegration,” written by Bas van Bommel, who is not a party politician, but was at the time more loosely associated with Thierry Baudet and the Forum for Democ-

racy.²³ In the national newspaper *De Volkskrant*, van Bommel comments on the statement made by Geert Wilders in parliament mentioned above about Christian values. Van Bommel first cites a statement by the Pope, that saying “no” to refugees is saying “no” to Christ, and then continues with Wilders:

During a session of the Dutch parliament, Geert Wilders suggested that closing borders and defending “our people” would be a realisation of “Christian values,” to much hilarity of other parliamentarians. ... Yet Wilders confronts us with an important question: what are our moral and Christian duties towards migrants, and how do these relate to other values and interests? Do neighbourly love and open borders go hand in hand? ... What to do if our needy “neighbours” are not lost individuals, but hundreds of thousands and even millions of migrants? Jesus praised the good Samaritan because he took care of an abused traveller, not because he hustled a complete tribe of people into Judea. Providing temporary assistance to refugees is not the same as mass asylum and naturalization. Christian morality does not oblige us to practice neighbourly love without any consideration of the political and demographic reality, or its long-term consequences. ... Perhaps, in this time of global mobility, neighbourly love does indeed ask us to take care mainly of our own people, to primarily protect the culture that Christian values originated in, and not to turn away from the potentially serious consequences of policies intended to be compassionate. Perhaps Geert Wilders’ definition of neighbourly love is not so laughable.

It is important to note that it is actually Van Bommel who interprets Wilders’ reference to Christian values as a definition of neighbourly love. Wilders himself does not use this term during the debate in question. This interpretation, that “Christian values” is heard implicitly as “neighbourly love” underlines the importance of the concept in this context of migration. Again, we see evidence here of a polemic, albeit in a more subtle way, in the suggestion that neighbourly love might not mean open borders. The intention of open borders and compassion might be to fulfil some idea of neighbourly love, Van Bommel argues,

²³ Bas van Bommel, “Blinde naastenliefde kan recept zijn voor politieke desintegratie,” *De Volkskrant* (September, 2015). Online: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/columns-opinie/blinde-naastenliefde-kan-recept-zijn-voor-politieke-desintegratie-b7e67824>.

but the consequences of policy also need to be included in weighing how neighbourly love works out. This is another theme that recurs in these sources, that the outcomes of policy are significant for determining to what extent they are based on neighbourly love. Van Bommel here confidently states that Christian morality requires the practice of neighbourly love within politics, with an eye for “demographic reality” and long-term consequences.

Like Karlsson, Van Bommel also offers a specific interpretation of the actions of the good Samaritan, stressing that the Samaritan only took care of an individual, rather than large numbers of people and in this sense, he is taken as the example of what is required to express neighbourly love. Van Bommel then makes a move that is similar to Krarup, understanding neighbourly love as the responsibility for those who are close, “our own people” and suggests that Dutch culture is apparently where Christian values originated, rather than the Middle East.

These three cases then illustrate some of the varying but often overlapping interpretations of neighbourly love that allow it to function in support of political hostility to migration and Islam, in spite of appeals made to it by those with opposing political views.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

It is very early in my research on this topic to draw any firm conclusions, either on neighbourly love specifically or on the political use of the Bible more broadly. But there are some observations to be made that can be helpful going forward.

Importantly, these sources on neighbourly love confirm that there is a lot to gain by using the Bible as a lens to look at the transition from religion to culture. The concepts that are central to this shift, of identity, belief, history, nationality, heritage, and culture, all occur explicitly and implicitly in the discourse surrounding the Bible. And we can cautiously say that in the emphasis on the continued significance of Christianity closely associated with national and cultural identity, the biblical lens

confirms Beaman's insights into the attempt to preserve the status of majority culture at the expense of other cultural and religious factors.

The second observation is that consequently, the Bible continues to matter in political discourse, both taken as an inspiration for personal faith and as a way to connect with the past and with Christian values, which does not require faith. In this way, the Bible appears to survive the numerical decline of Christianity by emerging as a text of national and cultural, in addition to, religious significance.

In this national and cultural framework, it apparently continues to matter what is in the Bible. The Bible is not just relevant as a whole, as a symbol, but also in its specific content. Political discourse critical of migration does not only rely on rhetoric that sounds vaguely Christian but can actually refer to specific aspects of biblical stories and offer specific interpretations. The degree to which these interpretations may be lacking from an academic perspective is obviously not relevant. What matters is the fact that biblical texts and themes are presented as meaningful, and as a legitimate way to access the cultural past and tap into the value of Christianity.

On the other hand, the distinction Christendom–Christianity does not appear helpful to interpret these sources. How would we measure the sincerity of Krarup versus that of religious representatives or politicians from traditional Christian parties, for example? Even though there may be certain tropes forming in this context, such as about the neighbour being physically close, the sources do not appear to use prefabricated slogans or empty rhetoric. Each develops its own logic based on a specific implicit understanding of how the Bible is meaningful. Rather than disguising their views as Christian, the claims about the authority of the interpretations that are given are in fact quite modest, as I have pointed out. The sources are passionate in opposing their opponents' views on migration policy, but more nuanced when it comes to the competitive contribution of their interpretation of the Bible and of neighbourly love in the spectrum of interpretations that exist.

There is a further observation to make connected to the distinction Christendom–Christianity which is that this type of nationalist and conservative tendency has been part of Christianity for centuries. Rather than assume that the “tolerant,” “foreigner-friendly” attitude is what is typical for Christianity, a slightly longer historical perspective obviously reveals that this is not the case.²⁴ This even applies specifically for the political use of the theme of neighbourly love. In the Dutch debate about the abolition of slavery, a lawyer and politician defended slavery in 1838 by saying: “Slavery must be continued and this is out of love for our neighbour, who will be in this condition *until God declares them free.*”²⁵

Cases where Christianity and the Bible are used to denigrate and exclude are not an exception that can be written off as “Christendom.” Claims about Christian values and identity in this political context are instead only the most recent reshaping of a consistently problematic aspect of European identity, which has always relied on notions of exceptionalism and superiority, and has connected these to religion.

²⁴ There is of course extensive scholarship on this, to mention just a few titles: Katharine Gerbner, *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); M. Lindsay Kaplan, *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Shawn Kelley, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology, and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (London: Routledge, 2002); Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²⁵ This statement is attributed to Jan Willem Gefken and occurred in an anonymous article “De vrijwording der neger-slaven,” *Nederlandse Stemmen over Godsdienst, Staat-, Geschiedenis- en Letterkunde* 6 (1838): 59 (italics in the original). For a discussion of Gefken, his attitudes towards slavery, and this quotation, see R. Reinsma, *Een merkwaardige episode uit de geschiedenis van de slavenemancipatie 1863–1963* (Den Haag: Van Goor Zonen, 1963), 15; Johanna Maria van Winter, “De openbare mening in Nederland over de afschaffing der slavernij,” *New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 34/1 (1952): 61–90 (65).

Finally, coming back to the other two areas where the Bible is relevant to the transition of religion to culture discussed above, namely Bible translation and biblical studies, and relating these to what we have seen in connection with political discourse, I would argue that they are all three tied up in a similar perspective. For all three, the Bible is not an ancient foreign object that has had many shapes and meanings over time. Instead, the Bible is uniquely “our text” in all three domains. It is “our text” both in the sense that it belongs uniquely to us, and in the sense that it is uniquely this text that is ours, unlike any other. In this light, they all three confirm and reinforce each other, however, perhaps unintentionally and unfortunately.