

Islam as the Folk Devil: Hashtag Publics and the Fabrication of Civilizationism in a Post-Terror Populist Moment

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With a focus on Twitter, this article investigates the populist moment triggered by a violent attack in the Northern European city of Turku, Finland, in August 2017. The article uses a mixed-method approach that applies a computational method for data collection and qualitative discursive mapping for data analysis. Moreover, the article applies Laclau's non-essentialist framework for theorizing on populism in connection to religion and critically discusses the types of religious implications identified in the "us" constructed *in negation* to Islam and the discursively constructed "bad" Muslim Other. The article suggests "civilizationism" and the related "Christianism" as potential schemas for advancing scholarly theorizing on the digital intersections between populism and religion, particularly in the present Northern European political context.

Keywords: populist moment, Islam, hashtag publics, Twitter, civilizationism, Christianity, terror attack, Laclau

The Turku Attack as a Populist Moment

On August 18, 2017, Finland—a Northern European country characterized by a Lutheran past, secularized present, and dominated by the political ideology of a welfare state—saw its first act of radical violence inspired by religion. Two people were killed, and eight others were wounded during a knife attack in the town of Turku, the old capital of Finland. Although the motive was initially unknown, Finnish police soon gathered evidence of the perpetrator's self-declared motivation. After the investigation, they announced that the incident was being treated as an Islamist terror attack. This was the first time in modern history that religious motivation was used by Finnish officials as an explanation for terrorist violence in the national context (see Malkki & Sallamaa, 2018).

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We argue that this scheme, in which a male North African asylum seeker claimed that his extreme violence was inspired by religious motivation, contributed to the rapid emergence of a populist moment in the immediate aftermath of the attack that was detectable on social media (here, Twitter). Drawing on Laclau's (2005) theory of hegemony and its non-essentialist conceptualization of populism as a *logic of political articulation*, we approach populism as something that evolves in an antagonist process where the political articulation of "us" is produced in contrast to "them" (here, the Muslim Other). In this Laclauian framework, populism can consist of varying content including religious and ideological constellations.

In this article, we explore how certain discourses on Islam are constitutive of populism in the context of the Turku attack of 2017. Here, we argue that this specific populist moment, when antagonism becomes apparent, is articulated through a Twitter-mediated hashtag public (Rambukkana, 2015). In the empirically emergent populist articulation of "us" in negation to Muslims as the religious "Other," we are particularly interested in discussing this process of othering through the concepts of "civilizationism" and the related "Christianism" (Brubaker, 2017) as populist discursive strategies. The present article asks the following research questions:

- RQ1: *What types of discursive strategies emerged among the emergent hashtag publics after the Turku stabbings that give rise to a populist moment?*
- RQ2: *How were such discourses used to create and uphold boundaries between "us" and "them" during this populist moment, and who constitutes the "us"?*
- RQ3: *What types of religious implications can be identified in civilizationism on generating "us" when constructed in negation to Islam with the discursively constructed "bad Muslim" as constitutive of "them"?*

The study employs a mixed-method approach that applies a computational data collection method with discursive cartography (e.g., Venturini, 2010a, 2010b) for qualitative analysis. This material covers the first 19 days after the Turku attack. The qualitative method of discursive mapping was used to navigate the discursive assemblages (Rambukkana, 2015) constitutive of hashtag publics on Twitter, with special attention given to statements and comments indicative of such publics and their specific positions in this populist moment.

The article is divided into three parts. First, we provide a framework for theorizing populism in connection to religion. Second, we outline the idea of hashtag publics in a populist moment and provide an empirical analysis of the Turku stabbings. Here, we articulate three discursive strategies: (1) Islam as the folk devil; (2) revealing the "real" Islam; (3) Islam in the context of fear of the "savage" Other. Third, we reflect on our empirical findings by critically discussing what types of religious implications can be identified in the "us" constructed *in negation* to Islam and the discursively constructed "bad" Muslim Other (see also Mamdani, 2005). We suggest civilizationism (Brubaker, 2017) and the related Christianism (DeHanas & Shterin, 2018) as potential schemas for advancing scholarly theorizing on the

intersections between populism and religion, namely the self-articulation of “us” in the present Northern European political context.

Theorizing Religion and Populism

Several frameworks exist to study the intersections between populism and religion. One of the dividing theoretical lines relates to the ideational (content-driven) and anti-essentialist (form-driven) approaches. The ideational view (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017) seeks to connect populism to particular religious ideas, thus foregrounding content. The ideational research trend may focus on populist content, sentiments (see also Salmela & von Scheve, 2018), or ideology (Krämer, 2017). Furthermore, they may analyze how religious ideas, dogmas, or symbols inspire and/or serve what could be called populist politics (see e.g., Marzouki, McDonnell, & Roy, 2016). Moreover, studies of these traditions typically address the connection between populism, religion, and nationalism (DeHanas & Shterin, 2018; Juergensmeyer, 2017).

In particular, many studies that focus on the relationship between Christianity and (typically right-wing) populism associate the use of religion in populist politics with racism, xenophobia, and hostility toward a multiplicity of marginalized groups (Marzouki et al., 2016). This research literature has established an explicit connection in the digital public sphere between discursive strategies of othering Islam and the strengthening of anti-Islamic sentiment in the Western liberal democratic societies characterized by Christian cultural heritage (see e.g., Abdel-Fadil, 2018; Awan, 2014; Evolvi, 2017). In addition, empirical research in this field has addressed populist alliances between Catholicism and (Southern and Eastern) Europe (Herbert, 2019; Roy, 2016) as well as Evangelical Christianity and its ties with populist U.S. politics (see e.g., Braunstein & Taylor, 2017). Another cluster of empirical research exists on populist groupings between Eastern Orthodoxy and Russia (Shterin, 2018), while an increasing amount of scholarly attention is being given to the analysis of populist politics and Hindu nationalism in India, as well as populism applied in Muslim politics (Hadiz, 2014; Patil, 2017).

In this article, we adopt what can be called an anti-essentialist view on populism that focuses on its form (i.e., the dynamics generating populism) to examine the relationship of populism with religion (e.g., Stavrakakis, 2004). Following Laclau (2005), our conceptualization of populism is first and foremost a *logic of articulation* that produces a political notion of “us” where—importantly—the “us” does not preexist but is constructed in discourse as different subjectivities while alignments are constructed in an antagonistic discourse. Giving special attention to a populist moment that follows from a certain antagonist discourse enables us to explain *how* the “us” is formed among the hashtag publics. We maintain that this approach is thus not fixed on any pre-given content (Dean & Maignushca, 2020; Palonen, 2020).

We argue that the use of civilizationalist arguments is one example of such dynamics in which various political and social needs, as well as the unmet desires of “us” (see Laclau, 2005), come together as one demand to form the populist moment through the rejection of the “Other.” In his article, “Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective,” Brubaker (2017) suggests this type of analytical approach to better understand the relationship between populism and religion as well as the related boundary work between “us” and “them” in the North European

political context. In Brubaker's (2017) view, the boundaries between "us" and "them" (Muslims) are drawn on both a nationalist and civilizationalist basis. In this civilizationist discursive strategy, Islam is constructed as a civilizational threat to (Northern and Western) European societies. This discourse is built around the notion of Christianity (see also DeHanas & Shterin, 2018), which evolves as a core value of European civilization.

Interesting in Brubaker's (2017) analysis is how the values associated with Christianity ally with "secularist" (e.g., opposition to religious symbols and language in public spaces) and "liberal" (e.g., defending female and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer [LGBTQ] rights) values and discourses (Brubaker, 2017). Importantly, Brubaker (2017) emphasizes that the type of Christianity embraced in this type of populist discourse is not about religion in the sense of substantive Christianity. As many sociologists of religion agree (Casanova, 1994), Northern European post-Protestant nations, such as Finland, are considered to host the most secularized societies in the world. In these societies, institutional religious practices and church attendance are in decline. However, it is specifically the secularized societal condition that gives power to this new type of discursive configuration between secular Christianity as a culture, identity, and antithesis to Islam (Brubaker, 2017; Mouritzen, 2006). As Brubaker (2017) explains,

It is precisely the ongoing erosion of Christianity as doctrine, organization, and ritual that makes it easy to invoke Christianity as a cultural and civilizational identity, characterized by putatively shared values that have little or nothing to do with religious belief or practice. As Europe becomes more secular, paradoxically, it is more easily represented as (culturally and civilizational) Christian. (p. 1199)

In this framework, Christianity becomes a matter of *belonging*, not believing (Beckford, 1994; Brubaker, 2017). That said, civilizationalism as a discursive strategy embraces Christianity not as a religion in an institutional sense but as a civilizational identity that is first and foremost understood as being in opposition to Islam. However, it also contains elements of secularism because civilizationalism-producing discourses aim to minimize the visibility of Islam in society and public life. Finally, this civilizational discursive strategy (selectively) celebrates liberalism as a characterization of "our" way of life in contrast to Islam, which is considered inherently illiberal (Brubaker, 2017).

Hashtag Publics in Mapping the Populist Moment

In recent years, scholars have argued for the increasing political relevance of Twitter as a platform for right-wing populist discourse (e.g., Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016; Bulut & Yörük, 2017; Evolvi, 2019; Gökay Özerim & Tolay, 2020; Pérez-Curiel, 2020) and public debates on extremist violence (Bruns & Hanusch, 2017; Carter, 2017; Downing, 2019; Eriksson, 2016, 2018). In the present article, we follow the perspective of Rambukkana (2015):

Hashtag-mediated discursive assemblages are neither simply the reflection of pre-existing discourse formations nor do they create them out of digital ether. Rather, they are nodes in the becoming of distributed discussions in which their very materiality as performative utterances is deeply implicated. (p. 3)

As such, populist moments on Twitter are profoundly hashtag-mediated (Eriksson Krutrök & Lindgren, 2018; Vis, 2013); the engagement of people in issues and topics gives rise to emerging publics. In the immediate aftermath of the attacks, Twitter was found to not only facilitate expressions of solidarity and compassion (De Cock & Pizarro Pedraza, 2018) but also nationalistic sentiments and increased hostility to views differing from one's own (Fischer-Preßler, Schwemmer, & Fischbach, 2019).

In a given populist moment, hashtags simultaneously mark experiential topics (e.g., immigration and terrorism, in our material), enact interpersonal relationships (e.g., affinity with politically like-minded people), as well as organize text. Importantly, hashtags enable "searchable talk" (Zappavigna, 2015). However, search as a linguistic, technological, and social functionality can also be problematic: Search is inflicted with manipulation on the platform's side, resulting in algorithmically curated and personalized search results that subsequently generate a more calculated public (Gillespie, 2014). In this way, search contributes to the possibility of aggregating like-minded people around certain hashtags.

Thus, while the somewhat unmoderated character of debates in the digital public space of Twitter provides a unique repertoire of views and understandings of the emerging hashtag publics, we argue that hashtag searchability nevertheless contributes to the generation of the populist moment since social media users seek to participate in specific conversations on Twitter. In this way, hashtags link individual comments and social media users who, as actors, construct networked publics structured by networked technologies (boyd, 2011). The hashtag publics (Rambukkana, 2015), or "ad hoc" publics (Bruns & Burgess, 2015), are simultaneously public in terms of reach, yet private in terms of effect (Crawford, 2010). Hashtags can thus be viewed as affordances that allow momentary connectedness (Rathnayake & Suthers, 2018), enabling a shared political temporality (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015) on Twitter that differs from that of other platforms.

We argue that a populist moment on Twitter is rendered and re-rendered by the communication between and among hashtag publics, which generates a form of temporal sociality constructed around a number of subjective viewpoints expressed as tweets, or (re)shared as retweets. As a feature, the hashtag "creates a public opinion space that promotes the exchange of opinions on current (political) debates" (Fischer-Preßler et al., 2019, p. 140). Hashtags are also effective in supporting interactions after affect-inducing events such as the Turku attacks.

The emotional base that populist moments tap into is characterized by anger and fear (Guillem, Guinjoan, & Anduiza, 2017). Hashtag publics are generally drawn together by affective resonance (Döveling, Harju, & Sommer, 2018) and often exhibit an ambient affiliation (Zappavigna, 2011) generated by tangential discursive encounters on Twitter. Populist discourses are premised on the emotional, often revolving around love for the homeland, fear of the foreigner, and righteous anger against corrupt elites endangering the nation's well-being (Levinger, 2017). The populist hashtag-mediated discursive assemblages (Rambukkana, 2015) are no different in this regard.

These mediated encounters among the affected publics (Papacharissi, 2014) also evoke disalignment and dissonance due to the ability of hashtags to "construe a range of complex meanings in social media texts" (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 274) where hashtags allow simultaneous participation in multiple

conversations, issues, and events (Rathnayake & Suthers, 2018). While social media discourse is regularly distributed across a range of hashtags (Rathnayake & Suthers, 2021), the underlying tensions constituting the populist moment are evident when using a single hashtag as an access point, as in the present study.

A hashtag can be framed in numerous ways by its surrounding text and co-occurring hashtags. Thus, co-text and tweet-internal discursive relations are at least as important as the broader context in which the tweet with the hashtag in question appears. Even the more informative hashtags (e.g., #TurkuAttack) offer different identification and disidentification points that provide relational opportunities for affective stance taking (Harju, 2019). Thus, hashtags appear in multiple ideologically divergent conversations and thereby contribute to the emergence of different hashtag publics (Rambukkana, 2015).

A Mixed-Method Approach

This study applied a mixed-method approach in which a computational data collection method was combined with a qualitative analysis. The hashtag #TurkuAttack was used in the computational data collection and the empirical analysis was conducted by applying discursive cartography (Venturini, Ricci, Mauri, Kimbell, & Meunier, 2015) to map the different positions of actors in the debate. The hashtag #TurkuAttack was chosen due to it being organically emergent (i.e., generated by Twitter users at the time of the attack) and having a specific semantic meaning that allowed focused data collection related to this specific event. The empirical material covers the immediate post-attack response (i.e., the first 19 days after the event) and consists of 2,982 tweets. While the majority of tweets in our data set are in Finnish, there are also tweets in English, Swedish, and German (and to a lesser extent, some other languages). The computationally gathered data were compiled in an Excel format and organized in temporal order. The metadata allowed us to access these tweets on the Twitter interface, thereby providing access to the adjoining tweets when deemed necessary for additional contextual information. Due to the sensitive nature of the empirical material, the example tweets provided in the analysis section have been anonymized so that only the date of the tweet is provided. Thus, the identifiers "User_01" and so on do not reflect the users' communicative turns in any temporal order.

A qualitative cartographic mapping (Marres, 2015; Venturini, 2010a, 2010b; Venturini et al., 2015) of the discursive assemblages around the hashtag #TurkuAttack was applied to trace the various (and divergent) hashtag publics surrounding the attack. The discursive approach to mapping "builds on the sociological methods of discourse analysis, for which the objective is not to determine the status of statements or topics as such but to *map positions in a debate*," where the analysis "serves exploratory purposes, namely, to detect relations between substantive arguments and socially and politically located actors and to render such relations available for interpretation by various audiences" (Marres, 2015, p. 661; emphasis added). The discursive method of mapping positions in the debate was particularly suited to this study because it addresses debates *not yet closed* (Venturini et al., 2015) and is thus a useful approach for analyzing suddenly erupting violent events that are still ongoing. This methodological approach allows us to investigate the different positions taken by different actors in the populist articulations around "us" and "them."

Discursive mapping permits us to locate the various antagonistic discourses that emerge among the discursive networks that make up the hashtag publics, allowing us to establish the various positions taken by different actors (Marres, 2015) who each frame the attack in different ways. Discursive mapping was thus used to garner more information on various actors, their stance regarding the attack, and their position vis-à-vis the populist moment.

The limitations of this study relate to the fluidity of the digital research context, which includes discursive flows between and across different discussions on Twitter. Although we used a computational data collection method, we did not have unlimited resources for data collection. Instead, we had to limit our data collection to one carefully selected hashtag. Consequently, we were only able to grasp a fraction of the discourses around Islam (the focus of this study) circulating on Twitter in the days after the attack (see e.g., Pink, Ruckenstein, Willim, & Duque, 2018). Acknowledging this limitation, the present study does not aim to quantify, compare, or generalize results based on the collected data. Instead, in this data sample, we focused on mapping those discursive elements illustrating the Laclauian populist dynamics as this was generated in the context of this violent attack in Turku. We also recognize that these were not the only discourses present in our data. For example, general discussions on solidarity toward the victims were excluded from this study as we focused on antagonism and othering as the relevant discourses contributing to the emergence of the populist moment, and with that, the political articulation of “us” against “them” in a framework of civilizationism.

Three Discursive Strategies

In the empirical analysis, we established three discursive strategies prominent in generating the populist moment, which we argue framed the ways in which Islam was discussed in the antagonist debate following the Turku attack. These discursive strategies include (1) Islam as the folk devil, (2) revealing the “real” Islam, (3) and the fear of the “savage” Other. Crucially, all three discursive strategies, which are premised on the antagonistic construction of “us” in opposition to the Muslim Other, frame Islam as a threat. Notably, the way this threat is perceived ranges from physical threats of violence to wider socioeconomic issues resonating with the post-2015 “refugee crisis” debates in Europe while the loss of national and cultural identity is also referenced (see Buonfino, 2004). These threat perceptions are premised on articulations of cultural, racial, and religious differences by the Twitter-mediated hashtag publics. Through this process, we argue, the Muslim Other becomes the key site of the discursive construction of “us” and “them” in this particular populist moment.

Islam as the Folk Devil

The act of violence in Turku sparked a debate among the hashtag publics about the causes of and reasons for extreme violence, and many were quick to point the finger at Islam. We describe this discursive strategy as claiming Islam as the folk devil. We take hereafter Stanley Cohen’s (1972/1987) idea of a cultural dynamic in which certain people or groups in society are accused in the public, popular discourse in media as outsiders of society, as deviant others, and are blamed for different types of social problems such as crime in society. In this conception, the folk devil can be considered a synonym for a scapegoat. Notably, this type of blaming as religious scapegoating is neither new nor only restricted to Islam (e.g.,

Juergensmeyer, 2017). It is often fed by present-day feelings of social and economic insecurity and growing inequality (see e.g., Kilp, 2011), as the following examples show:

- "Why is no one surprised to learn the knife attacker who killed 2 in #Finland was of foreign origin? #migrants #turkuattack" (User_01, personal communication, August 18, 2017).
- "In #Finland we just tolerated RADICAL ISLAMIC TERRORISM. #Turku #turkuattack" (User_02, personal communication, August 19, 2017).

The security discourses observed in the empirical material involve various types of threats whereby the Muslim Other becomes a folk devil due to the recent extreme violence as well as the current socioeconomic conditions (characterized by insecurity). The statements blaming Islam on Twitter tend to be totalizing in nature, leaving very little room for negotiation:

- "#turkuattack It's time to start telling the truth about Islam. No more apologies" (User_03, personal communication, August 19, 2017).

The self-righteousness in the preceding tweet is echoed in many other tweets that claim to preach "the truth" about Islam. Blaming Islam and making it a folk devil and a scapegoat function as a venting opportunity and may even serve as a coping mechanism since assuming a guilty party helps construct clarity in the form of an imagined enemy, which is characteristic of a populist moment. Deciding on a culprit and assigning blame offers perceived avenues for prevention and control (e.g., halting immigration). However, blame is rarely assigned to a single party. While blame is assigned to Islam in the following tweet, it was also assigned by others to the political left (i.e., the "liberals" or the "green left") for "allowing" the attack to happen due to their immigration policies:

- "Liberals will still say in 2017 that muslims have nothing to do with TERRORISM #turkuattack #IslamIsTheProblem #GoTrump" (User_04, personal communication, August 18, 2017).
- "#Diversity is #Finland's greatest strength, right? #turkuattack #AsylumSeekers #Moroccan" (User_05, personal communication, August 19, 2017).

The debate surrounding blame reveals the need to assign blame to understand what is occurring, control it, and guide efforts to regain safety. Crucially, scapegoating Islam for life-threatening violence removes White Western (non-Muslim) actors from the discourse of violence while simultaneously rendering violent acts carried out by non-Muslims as less disconcerting. The Turku attack stirred the hashtag publics not because of violence *per se* but because of the constitution of the perpetrator representing something that does not fit into Finnish society, hence the folk devil analogy (Cohen, 1972/1987). However, concerns regarding increasing societal division and assaults on the Muslim community in the wake of the stabbings are echoed in the following tweet:

- "Sorry for result #turkuattack will have on Finnish Muslim community and immigrants from MENA. [MENA refers to the Middle East and North Africa; explanation added by the authors] (User_06, personal communication, August 19, 2017).

Due to preexisting concerns about safety that date back to the "refugee crisis" of 2015, the stabbings served to materialize existing fears of a section of society, fueling the immigration debate and making new links between (Muslim) asylum seekers and terrorism:

- "Politicians' logic: set a fire and then wonder why it is so difficult to put it out. #terrorism #asylumseeker #Islamism #turkuattack" [translated from Finnish] (User_07, personal communication, August 19, 2017).

The Turku attack offered a convenient political weapon that supported preexisting populist anti-immigration attitudes, particularly Islamophobia, anti-Muslim sentiment, and nationalism while deepening the divide between the White Europeans as the Western "us" and "bad Islam" as "them." Thus, we suggest that scapegoating is best characterized as a generalizing discursive practice of assigning blame that leaves no space for differences on an individual level. In this context, the possibility of placing blame on a guilty individual (i.e., the perpetrator) is erased; instead, an entire group of people with a certain religious affiliation (i.e., Islam) is implicated. The characterization of Islam as a threat to Western values, civilization, and way of life is fundamental for scapegoating to work.

Revealing the "Real" Islam

In our analysis, the discourse of *revealing the "real" Islam* refers to a line of thinking among hashtag publics whereby social groups are considered to have inherent defining properties (i.e., certain unchangeable characteristics common among all group members; Toosi & Ambady, 2011). In our material, we observed individuals essentializing Islam as violent (e.g., Semati, 2011) and an evil threat, as exemplified by the tweets below:

- "Religion, the root cause of all evil #turku #turkuattack #terrorism #terrorist" [translated from Finnish] (User_08, personal communication, August 19, 2017).
- "It's clear from #Barcelona #turkuattack & many such atrocities, that Muslims are incapable of handling Islam" (User_09, personal communication, August 19, 2017).
- "Islamist attack now in Finland, raised Allah-hu-Akbar slogans, several died/injured till now and still it's a religion of peace #turkuattack" (User_10, personal communication, August 18, 2017).
- "Guardian's article makes no reference to Islamist or Muslim. Why do Left media hide the consistency of Islam in terror attacks #turkuattack" (User_11, personal communication, August 18, 2017).

Essentialized caricatures (Beaman, 2013) obscure the complexity of religion. The debates among the hashtag publics (Rambukkana, 2015) on Twitter regarding the constitution of "real" Islam culminates in speculations of "religious violence," which makes a problematic distinction between religious violence and "secular violence" (see Gunning & Jackson, 2011). Security discourses related to threats divide the nation into victims and perpetrators and draw on the simplistic notion of "real" Islam as a violent religion. Demonizing religion increases threat perceptions based on a religious identity, which is detrimental to the entire Muslim community. For example, Islam being a "religion of peace" is commonly used in the material as an ironic remark that gets to the root of essentialized Islam:

- “Wasn’t Islam supposed to be a religion of peace and Muslims nice? #Turkuattack” [translated from Finnish] (User_12, personal communication, August 18, 2017).

Perceptions of threat oscillate between what is considered a potential threat manifested in a fear of the Other to actual threats manifested in acts of extreme violence. In a vicious circle, violence evokes the religious folk devil. Threat becomes symbolic and harbored in the Muslim figure (see e.g., Sumiala, Valaskivi, Tikka, & Huhtamäki, 2018). Since the so-called new terrorism (see Tucker, 2001) has no country, the dormancy of a threat is very powerful in instigating fear because it is a highly embodied type of threat perception. Simultaneously, the common enemy rhetoric gives rise to the imagery of the “enemy among us,” leaving *us* vulnerable against *them*. Polarization between good and evil and between “us” and “them” is prevalent in the hashtag publics and brings the danger of growing societal polarization with it.

Furthermore, this type of discursive strategy in which extreme violence is coupled with a religious threat diverts attention away from broader questions regarding the cause or motivation for these acts of violence by already proposing evilness as the cause (Said, 1981; Spencer, 2010). In the discursive strategy of revealing the “real” Islam, Islam alone is posited as the cause (i.e., the evil and threatening nature of the religion). Thus, the debate over the constitution of Islam—of the “true Islam”—revolves around the fundamental and morally binding binary of good (*us*) and evil (*them*).

Fear of the “Savage” Other

The discourse of the *fear of the “savage” Other* stems from racial, ethnic, and cultural representations of the Other as different from “us,” which often rests “in the centrality of Whiteness—its normativity and invisibility” (Jiwani, 2006, p. 6). This process essentially involves the assignment of negative attributes and negative evaluations. It is important to note the difference between racialization and racism since this “new racism” departs from “biological racism” and is built on discourses of Otherness, which restrict individuals’ rights based on being perceived as not fitting in or not belonging to that culture and society (Dunn, Klocker, & Salabay, 2007). Thus, the process of racialization does not necessarily involve “race” in terms of genetics; instead, racialization can also “operate through asserted cultural features, such as religious performances” (Dunn et al., 2007, p. 565). Thus, the racialization of extreme violence constructs it as distinct from other types of violence by linking it to race or ethnicity, thereby also rendering this quality characteristic of a certain group of people. This form of negative stereotyping, which constructs radical violence as inherently Islamic, is at the heart of the debate among the hashtag publics regarding what constitutes extreme, life-threatening violence, as exemplified below:

- “Europe is boiling so do we, they say terrorism has no religion, seems no right, all are Islamists #turkuattack #BarcelonaAttacks #europeattack” (User_13, personal communication, August 19, 2017).
- “AntiWhites don’t speak for us. AntiWhites are Forcing Assimilation in White countries. #turkuattack is part of #WhiteGenocide” (User_14, personal communication, August 19, 2017).
- “We must stand together against AntiWhites & #WhiteGenocide” (User_15, personal communication, August 19, 2017).

Discursively portraying Islam as “non-European” highlights cultural incompatibility and helps construct Europe as somewhat unitary and Islam as alien. Thus, constructing “an imagined cultural community” of Europe using #DefendEurope elicits a shared Europeanness (Lähdesmäki, 2012). This is shown in the following tweets:

- “#invasion #turkuattack #wakeupeurope #migri #DefendEurope #outwiththeshit #closetheborders #startdeportations” [translated from Finnish] (User_16, personal communication, August 22, 2017).
- “The blood of innocents is on your hands @JunckerEU @AngelaMerkeICDU @EU_Commission #TurkuAttack9” (User_17, personal communication, August 19, 2017).

In this discursive strategy of the fear of the “savage” Other, European victimhood is opposed to the racialized “common enemy,” which is the image of a Muslim. The construction of a common enemy is constitutive of the populist “us” since several political needs and desires aggregate under one shared political claim: to keep non-European Muslims away from Europe. These tweets tap into this European imagination, where the Muslim Other “haunts our society, ‘our international community’” (Semati, 2010, p. 257). Linking the Turku stabbings in Finland (in Northern Europe) with the Barcelona attacks (in Southern Europe) that took place the previous day connects Turku to a string of attacks and the shared European civilizational threat setting Europeanness against the “savage” or “alien” Other (Saeed, 2007). The terrorist Other is but one articulation of the Muslim Other that has no place in the imagined shared European civilization:

- “Why are #Moroccans allowed into Europe? They are nearly involved in every Jihadist attack. #BarcelonaTerrorAttack #turkuattack” (User_18, personal communication, August 19, 2017).
- “Two cultural Muslim enrichment over two days. Wow, when will Europe wake up!! #turkuattack #BarcelonaTerrorAttack” (User_19, personal communication, August 19, 2017).

The interpretative frames constructed by these tweets draw on a specific socioeconomic imagination where European affluence is juxtaposed with the dire conditions leading to the recent wave of immigration to Europe from non-European countries. These discourses form a global network, a constellation of opinion that the hashtag publics also tap into.

Furthermore, this type of racialization of radical violence in the context of Islam becomes fused with racialized masculinity (see Britton, 2018) that renders the Muslim man “savage,” violent, and dangerous, which manifests in security discourses around rape in the context of immigration. Thus, the image of the Muslim man suffers from the conflation of race, culture, religion, and violence:

- “#parliament #finlandfirst #terror #finlandattack #Turku #turkuattack #refugees #pakoLoiset #rapefugees #startdeportations #muslims” [translated from Finnish] (User_20, personal communication, August 19, 2017).

On making a geographical and religious link by coining the term “rapefugees,” this comment establishes a connection between rape, Islamic culture, and immigration. The orientalist discourse constructs the Other as less civilized and more brutal—in a word, “savage.” In summation, anti-Islamic

sentiment is reproduced in the process of the racialization of violence by constructing the Muslim Other as a unified category identifiable by the characteristic of violence. Furthermore, it simultaneously constructs an "us" through the antithesis of the Other, with White Europeaness (including White Finnishness) being culturally and racially superior and associated with elements of higher Western (more specifically, European) civilization, which is detached from extreme violence. The discursive strategy of racializing "the common enemy to Europe" as Muslim further highlights the orientalist and hierarchical distinction between "us" and "them" in this populist moment generated by radical violence.

Conclusions

In this article, we have analyzed Twitter-mediated anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic discourses triggered by a violent attack in the Northern European city of Turku in 2017. After the qualitative discursive mapping of comments and statements accompanied by the #TurkuAttack hashtag, we identified three main discursive strategies, namely (1) Islam as the folk devil; (2) revealing the "real" Islam; (3) the fear of the "savage" Other. Notably, all these discursive strategies were mobilized in this particular populist moment. Following Laclau (2005), and by conceptualizing populism as an affective co-constitutive articulation of "us" and the Other through antagonism (Palonen, 2020), we established the three discursive strategies that were generated and thrived in the populist moment. In this logic of articulation, Islam is indeed constructed as a common enemy—a position that contributed to the anti-Islamic sentiment among the hashtag publics. This effective articulation of the political demand constitutes an assumed populist "us" in negation to the discursively constructed "bad Islam" as constitutive of the bad Muslim Other. This finding is in line with many other studies on religion and populism that recognize anti-Islamic sentiment in the public discourse (see e.g., Awan, 2014; Evolvi, 2017).

In this section, we aim to advance research on religion and populism by taking a closer theoretical look at the constitution of "us," particularly in the context of Brubaker's (2017) view of civilizationism and the related ideas about Christianity (DeHanas & Shterin, 2018) being connected to secularism and liberalism. A better understanding of the intersections between populism and religion requires asking the following question about the populist moment: If this is the populist articulation of "them," who or what are "we"? The three discursive strategies presented in this article consist of components from all three elements of Brubakerian civilizationism although secularist and Christianist features dominate over liberalism. Of the three discursive strategies, both the folk devil discourse and the discourse of revealing the "real" Islam function as boundary tools between "us" and "them" by pointing the finger at Islam and claiming to reveal the "true Islam" as an inherently violent and destructive religion. Notably, certain secularist features typical of Brubaker's (2017) conception of civilizationism prevail in these strategies. In this context, religion (Islam, in this case) is bad news. We may recognize an argumentation pattern characteristic of secularist thinking, where Western modernity equals secular and civilized society, while religion refers to backwardness and primitive, premodern violence (Casanova, 1994).

To defend Western civilization and its struggle to free itself from the power of religion, one must successfully defend one's "own" society. In our empirical context, this is represented by the struggle of a Northern European society (i.e., Finland, a post-Protestant, secularized, and liberal society) against the premodern, harmful, and dangerous influence of Islam. Additionally, as a discursive strategy, this type of essentialization also contributes to secularist and liberal features of civilizationism since it constructs Islam

as an essentially bad and violent religion. The civilizationalist argumentation behind this strategy can be articulated as follows: The more Islam there is in society, the less plurality and individual freedom of choice for people there is. In this civilizationalist perception, Islam is primarily constructed as a threat to European society because it means submission (the literal meaning of Islam) to violence.

Furthermore, the discursive strategy of fear of the "savage" Other consists of explicit elements of Christianity as an identity and culture for Europeans under threat. In this articulation of civilizationalism, Western (European) heritage is viewed as superior and now under threat from Islam, which represents an orientalist (and "savage") religion. As the description suggests, orientalist arguments form the backbone of this discursive strategy, which is mobilized to draw a boundary between "us" as White Europeans (an ethnicity) embodying Christian heritage and "them" as non-White Muslims not belonging to Christian Europe in terms of religion, culture, or race. This use of civilizationalist arguments and Christianity among the examined hashtag publics can be argued to function as a politicized moment bringing together political and social desires as well as the unfilled needs of a universalizing "us" to generate populist demand, which consequently articulates a political community. At this moment, the "us" is constructed around a discourse in which religion (Christianity, as a form of civilizational identity) is fabricated as a meaningful identity and source of belonging.

In conclusion, we reflect on our findings in the framework of two interconnected schemes (i.e., theoretical and methodological) that we argue are relevant for future studies of the intersections between religion and populism in the expanding number of digital contexts. First, we claim that Laclau's (2005) non-essentialist approach provides fruitful conceptual tools to enrich empirical research in social media contexts. This approach opens up new avenues for thinking about digital intersections—particularly between religion and populism—as ongoing and dynamic processes among hashtag publics and boundary work. The Laclauian perspective on the contingent relationship between communicative dynamics, platforms, and hashtag publics helps empirical research grasp the political implications of events such as violent attacks, as well as the nature and significance of discourses on religion(s) that these draw on and give rise to.

Second, we argue that the very non-essentialist take on the articulations of populism provides scholarship in media, religion, and politics with a fresh perspective on this challenging phenomenon. Moreover, it offers a novel interpretive space for rethinking "the religious" in connection to "us" when creating political communities in the North European context. We maintain that the non-essentialist orientation furthers scholarship in the fields of media, religion, and politics by acknowledging and analyzing potential—and perhaps less explicit—religious underpinnings such as Christianity as a civilizational identity in political communication among hashtag publics in different digital contexts (Meyer & Moors, 2006).

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