

Orbán deploys Christianity with a twist to tighten grip in Hungary

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Hungary's far-right leader using Christian message to justify his immigration policy

"Europe can ignore or deny or struggle against its own identity and its Christian roots. But by doing so the society commits suicide," said László Kiss-Rigó, the bishop of Szeged, as he drove into Budapest on a recent afternoon. "And the more migrants that come, the more Christian values will be watered down."

Christian values, or a particular interpretation of them, have become the centrepiece of Hungarian government messaging under its far-right leader, [Viktor Orbán](#), and Kiss-Rigó operates at the nexus of the prime minister's interests.

As well as his role as bishop, he is also the chairman of Szeged's local football team, which is owned by the church. He was in Budapest to make arrangements for the inaugural concert at a new multipurpose stadium, which will be opened later this summer with an appearance by Plácido Domingo – just one part of the massive investment that the football-mad Orbán has made into the sport.

On the matter of migration, and much else, Kiss-Rigó and Orbán are singing from the same hymn sheet. The bishop denies, for example, that putting up walls to keep people out of the country doesn't fit with Christian values. "Everyone who knocks at your door and asks admission is welcome to be examined. But people who jump into your house through the roof should be protected against," he said.

Now [in his third consecutive term](#), Orbán has increasingly used far-right and anti-migrant rhetoric as he cements control of the country in increasingly authoritarian fashion. He used to describe his system as an "illiberal democracy", but recently he has changed focus, preferring instead to call it a "Christian democracy". The government's messaging is still based around stopping immigration and protecting a "besieged" Europe from outsiders, but it now comes in increasingly Christian packaging, both at home and abroad.

At a lavish party to mark US independence day in Budapest, Orbán told guests that finally, with the accession of Donald Trump, there was an "overlap of values" between the US and Hungary. "Neither of us is willing to accept the hypocrisy of modern politics, which neglects the fact that [Christianity](#) is the most persecuted religion globally," he said. In a sign of just how much things have changed in the relationship over the past few years, Trump's ambassador David Cornstein called Orbán a "perfect partner" and arranged for his old friend, the singer Paul Anka, to serenade the Hungarian prime minister.

Trump himself lavished praise on Orbán during [a May visit to the White House](#) that ended years of isolation in which top US officials shunned Orbán's government over rule-of-law concerns. "You have been great with respect to Christian communities. You have really put a block up and we appreciate

that very much,” said Trump, apparently referring to the fence Orbán’s government has built along Hungary’s southern border to keep out migrants.

The Hungarian Catholic church, the largest church in the country, has been supportive of Orbán’s hardline policies on migration, despite frequent calls from the pope for [Europe](#) to be more tolerant and understanding of the suffering of those who have fled war and poverty.

Only 15% of Hungarians say they attend church on a weekly basis, but 80% identify as Christian. Orbán, who started out in politics in the late 1980s as an anti-communist activist with little time for religion, found God in the 1990s, and even remarried his wife in a religious ceremony.

Since then, he has frequently invoked Christian values, but of late the intensity has increased.

Now, barely a month goes by without Orbán hosting a delegation of Christian leaders from somewhere in the world. Next year, Budapest will host the [International Eucharistic Congress](#), an international gathering of tens of thousands of Catholics from across the world designed to celebrate the actual presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, which will be accompanied by a vast outdoor mass and various entertainment programmes. The Hungarian State Opera has even announced its forthcoming season will showcase only works that deal with Christian themes.

But there’s one problem with all this: the policies of Orbán’s government don’t seem to be particularly Christian. One recent law [saw the criminalisation of homelessness](#), penalising the street sleepers who are a frequent sight in the underpasses and courtyards of Budapest, rather than dealing with the problem’s causes. Asylum seekers are held in shipping containers in special transit zones near Hungary’s border fence, and the country’s policy of [denying food to failed asylum seekers](#) was branded “an unprecedented human rights violation in 21st-century Europe” by a human rights group. Government-controlled media often [uses dehumanising rhetoric](#) about migrants and refugees.

Kiss-Rigó, who believes that most migrants at the Hungarian border are wealthier than the police repelling them, and that “only a tiny minority” are actually refugees, sidestepped questions on whether he agreed with the pope’s calls for tolerance.

Others have been less reticent. A journalist and founding member of Orbán’s Fidesz party, Zsolt Bayer, said in 2016 that the pope was “either a [senile old fool or a scoundrel](#)” for his pro-refugee sentiments.

Not all of Hungary’s religious leaders feel the same. Gábor Iványi, a Methodist priest with a flowing, white beard who runs a homeless shelter in the scruffy eighth district of Budapest, was formerly on good terms with Orbán and even officiated at his (second, religious) wedding ceremony, but now decries the prime minister’s policies as being the opposite of Christian teachings. Last summer, he tried to distribute food to people being held in the transit zones, but was denied access. Some critics suggest that “Christian values” is code for something else altogether. “There’s just no doubt that this is organised as a way of saying that ‘Christianity’ means ‘white conservative Europe’. It’s a trope. Say the word ‘Christian’ and it says everything else that you want to say,” said Michael Ignatieff, rector of the Central European University, which is moving part of its [operations from Budapest to Vienna](#) after the government denied it accreditation.

Kiss-Rigó would perhaps agree. He conceded that Hungarians are much less religious than Poles, for example, but defined “Christian values” in vague cultural terms: as much about shutting out the Muslim “other” as about any sense of personal religious belief. His favourite author is the [British anti-Islam commentator Douglas Murray](#), and he said Europe was in danger of being turned into a “easily manipulable faceless mass” by unspecified dark forces.

"I'm not saying all of this because I hope that next Sunday more people will come to church. In Europe, even an atheist is a Christian," he said.

Hungary's foreign policy has also been taking on an increasingly Christian hue. A special "Hungary Helps" programme has been set up to provide aid to persecuted Christians in Africa and the Middle East. "Help should be provided where the trouble lies instead of bringing the trouble to Europe," said a spokesman for the programme. He said it had disbursed \$30m in aid in the past two years, almost exclusively to help Christian communities or projects backed by Christian groups.

As Budapest has come in for increasing criticism from Brussels over rule-of-law concerns and democratic backsliding, Orbán has wooed other far-right leaders who use Christian rhetoric. He was the only EU leader to attend the inauguration of Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro in January, while he enjoys a warm relationship with the Law and Justice government in Poland.

Katalin Novák, Hungary's minister of state for family, youth and international affairs, has also had a busy travel schedule, meeting rightwing and Christian groups in many countries to showcase the government's policies on improving birth rates and promoting traditional values. In March, she gave the keynote address at a conference organised by the Hungarian embassy in Washington entitled "Making Families Great Again", attended by a number of rightwing American Christian groups.

"We think that the problems of Europe can be traced back to the denial of Christian roots. We see the misinterpretation of tolerance many times. Being tolerant should not mean that one gives up his or her identity," said Novák, in written responses to questions.

These talking points have hit home with some rightwing Republicans, improving the standing of Orbán in Washington, and meaning some officials ended up more suspicious of NGOs and opposition activists than of Orbán's government. "Wrapping itself in the words of being a Christian nation, with traditional values, created a subtext that critics are not legitimately concerned about the deterioration of the rule of law, but instead motivated by a progressive and pro-LGBT agenda," said Scott Cullinane, who until last year was professional staff member on a congressional subcommittee dealing with [Hungary](#).

Orbán's position in Europe looks to be weakened after the recent European elections and a series of scandals among potential far-right allies, which means the approval of Trump and rightwing republicans is a useful blessing.

"We are very happy that there are a few politicians like Orbán and Trump who really represent those values which we Christians believe to be important," said Kiss-Rigó, when asked if it was plausible to hold up the US president as a paragon of Christian virtue. For him, as for Orbán, the backlash against liberalism is more important than any specific Christian virtues.

"I don't think he will be canonised in the Catholic church but this is not the point. After the attempted dictatorship of nihilism, manipulated by the PC-talkers, his personality is a refreshing one."

Shaun Walker

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