ATHENA
THESIS SERIES

2025

Research Project
"Cultural diplomacy in Europe and Beyond"

The Gospel According to Brussels: How the European Union Instrumentalizes Religion to Justify its Foreign Policy Responses to Russian and Israeli Aggression

Chiara
Fachin

Co-funded by the European Union

ATHENA
- Jean Monnet Chair -

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the ATHENA Jean Monnet Chair, the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

Acknowledgements

I dedicate this thesis to my grandfather, Amerigo Fachin. I do not know for certain if God exists or if there is an afterlife, but I like to think that wherever you are, you are never too far away. I carry your memory with me in every step I take, in every act of kindness I strive for, and in every difficult decision I have to make. I can still remember our last conversation, the last words you spoke to me before I left, thinking I would get the chance to see you again. To my "I love you more", your only answer was "Impossible". Although it has been six years since you left this world, I still cannot speak, or in this case, write about it without feeling the familiar ache of grief in my throat. But as Paul Bettany playing Vision in the Marvel Show WandaVision said: "What is grief if not love persevering?" And so, it is with grief, love, and the hope that we will meet again that I dedicate this to you. You continue to guide me, inspire me to become a better person and do my part to make this world a better place than how we found it – even if just a little.

To my family – Mamma, Papà, Athena – thank you for being my constant support. Your love, care, and warmth surround me every time I cross the threshold into our home and are what keep me grounded as I navigate my life abroad. Thank you for standing by me through every tear and late-night meltdown. Mamma and Papà, you left your home country so that Athena and I could have better opportunities, and it is because of your strength and selflessness that I am here today. Since I can remember, you have taught me an important lesson: to stand up for what I believe in, even when it means standing alone. I carry this lesson with me in everything I do, and I hope it echoes through the pages of this thesis. Athena, my older sister, my ride or die, my rock. We can go days without talking – seriously, learn to read your texts. We can argue for hours on end only to stand at each other's doors to ask if the other wants to go for a walk. And while we might not always see eye to eye, I trust you like no one else in this world. Thank you for being the best family I could have asked for. This is as much your work as it is mine.

To my friends scattered all over the world. Mrinalini, I doubt I would have made it through this thesis with my sanity intact without our super fun study sessions. Thank you for listening to all my rather interesting theories – that is one way to put it – and still supporting me through all the delusions. Martina, throughout this entire journey, you have continued to inspire me to show up as my most authentic self – not just every day, but in my writing as well. I genuinely believe you embody what it means to be an *academic weapon* – not because you work like a

machine, but because you pour your heart into every word you write. Whenever I felt stuck, I would ask myself, “What would Marti do?”, and that question alone was often enough to help me move forward. Anna, Emma, Assia, and Iliada, I have known you for only a few months and yet I feel like I have known you for a lifetime. Although we did not see each other much in the months leading up to the submission of the thesis, I knew I could always count on you. Whether it was to ask, “Are you also behind?” or “Does this sentence sound weird to you?”, you were always there, ready to offer a safe environment in which I could let go of all my worries – even if just for one moment. Lune, Wenka, Sukrit, and Miss Keisha, sharing this chapter of my life with you has been a gift, one I hope to keep even after it comes to an end. Thank you for all the late-night working sessions, where we would sit on our couch, and you would reassure me that my thesis made sense, even when I felt like it did not. And, of course, how could I forget Miss Keisha, who would come to my door each night, waking me up and completely ruining my sleep schedule? But honestly, I would not want it any other way. Anna, Giulia, Beatrice, and Raffaele – to say I love you would be an understatement; I am utterly and madly in love with every single one of you. Growing up with you happened by chance, but growing old with you is a decision I make every day. Thank you for being there for me, for your support, for your reassurance, and, above all, for believing in me from day one.

Finally, I want to thank the person who made this journey bearable and, dare I say, enjoyable. Olga, my English fails me as I try to express my gratitude and admiration for you, so if you will allow me, I would like to do so in a slightly different way. Ви робили те, що робив би певно будь-яка наукова керівниця: давали поради, відповідали на мої запитання і допомагали мені рухатися вперед, коли я відчувала, що застрягла. Але для мене Ви були і є не просто науковою керівницею. Після розчаровуючого досвіду з моєю попередньою дипломною роботою, я почала з певними застереженнями. Однак Ви швидко довели, що я помилялась. З першої ж лекції пристрасть, з якою Ви ставитеся до своєї роботи, зачарувала мене. Те, як ви поводили себе в аудиторії, заохотило мене з нетерпінням чекати наших зустрічей щотижня. Але здебільшого Ваша теплота, доступність, доброта і людяність показали мені, що я можу довіряти Вам і бути впевненою у собі. Ви дозволили мені відчути, що мене бачать і чують, приймаючи мої страхи і проблеми не з осудом, а з турботою і розумінням. Ви навчили мене, яким цікавими можуть бути дослідження. Але що важливіше, Ви навчили мене, як я можу відстоювати те, у що я вірю, за допомогою своїх слів. Мати Вас своєю науковою керівницею було чудовим досвідом, а знати Вас як особистість - ще кращим. Дякую Вам.

Table of Contents

Abstract – Epiphany

Although the European Union is frequently framed as the ultimate forum for secular discourse, to claim that religion does not play a role in European politics – and, by extension, European foreign policy – would be erroneous. This is especially true when one considers the Judeo-Christian origins of secularism as it is known in the Western world. Furthermore, religion has been increasingly employed by far-right political parties across Europe to demarcate between an internal Self and an external Other – typically framing the former as Judeo-Christian or secular, and the latter as Muslim. This process of Othering has increasingly extended to the wider European project, thereby underscoring the growing salience of religion at the European level.

Despite this, existing literature frequently overlooks the intersection between religion, the EU and European foreign policy. With this thesis, I seek to fill this research gap. Grounded in postcolonial theory, the concept of normative empire Europe, and grievability theory, I examine how the EU instrumentalizes religion to justify its foreign policy responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people. Through critical discourse analysis, I argue that the EU instrumentalizes religion differently across the two cases to construct civilizational and grievability hierarchies, ultimately justifying action against Russia and inaction toward Israel.

Chapter 1 – Genesis

Religion is often portrayed as a moral, private, and personal matter that is unique to each individual. While individuals might experience religion differently, it would be erroneous to claim that: 1) it is not a constitutive element of culture, and 2) it is apolitical. On the one hand, and as I show in subsequent sections, religion has become increasingly culturalized, meaning it is treated as an inherent aspect of cultural identity rather than as set of beliefs (Lähdesmäki, 2022, p.173; Wolkenstein, 2023). On the other hand, the increasing instrumentalization of religion by far-right political parties to justify and, subsequently, advance their own political agendas – including their stance on foreign events – goes to show that religion has been re-entering the political sphere – or maybe, it never truly left (Bottici & Challand, 2013; Peker, 2022; Smeets, 2024). Although the body of literature on how far-right political parties instrumentalize religion is vast, the same cannot be said about research on the intersection between religion, the European Union (EU) and European foreign policy. Indeed, the existing literature typically focuses on the role of religion in the construction of a European identity – as a constitutive factor or as an identity-marker – yet the vast majority of the research carried out thus far does not delve deeper into how religion might be instrumentalized to justify the EU's foreign policy responses across cases. This points to a clear gap in the literature, calling for further research in this area. Consequently, this thesis seeks to address the research question: *How does the European Union instrumentalize religion to justify its foreign policy responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people?* Although I show this further in subsequent sections, I have decided to focus on Russia and Israel and Israel and Palestine, partly out of a personal commitment and partly out of the stark difference in response by the EU.

With this thesis, I do not aim to critique religion itself. On the contrary, I seek to critique the ways in which institutions, supposedly founded on the principles of peace, democracy, and human rights, employ religion to justify the differential treatment of aggressors and victims. As I show in the subsequent sections, this instrumentalization creates and perpetuates civilizational and grievability hierarchies, allowing colonial legacies to persist within contemporary global politics. Beyond unpacking the rhetorical strategies embedded in the EU's foreign policy discourse, this research is also driven by a sense of personal and collective responsibility. As a queer Southern European woman, I am extremely aware of the privileges I have living in a part of the world where peace, stability, and prosperity are the norm – at least

in Western Europe. Yet these conditions did not emerge in a vacuum. They are inextricably linked to Europe's colonial past – a legacy that continues to shape global hierarchies of value, power, and morality. As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Francesca Albanese, has stated, "We need to deal with our colonial past" (Nullpunkt, 2025).

To address the research question, this thesis is structured as follows. In Chapters 2 and 3 I provide the theoretical foundation for the analysis that ensues in later sections. Chapter 2 presents a review of the existing literature – ranging from discussions on secularism and the instrumentalization of religion by far-right political actors, to how processes of Othering at the European level have progressively occurred along religious lines. In Chapter 3, I introduce the theories I employ in this thesis, along with a justification for their selection. In Chapter 4, I explore the EU's relationships with Russia and Israel. In Chapter 5, I describe the methodological approach I use and the rationale behind the chosen methods and data. Here, I present the findings for each case study, which I analyse individually using the theories from Chapter 3. Lastly, in Chapter 6, I reflect on the broader implications of the analysis – particularly its societal relevance. More importantly, I reflect on how the instrumentalization of religion by the EU might differ across the case studies to ultimately show how religion might be instrumentalized across cases to justify foreign policy responses. Following, I conclude by discussing the limitations of the study, alongside potential directions for future research.

Chapter 2 – The Scholarly Scriptures

In the following section, I provide the reader with a critical review of the existing literature on the instrumentalization of religion in political discourse, specifically in the European context. As I previously mentioned, the existing literature typically stirs away from analysing how religion might be instrumentalized to justify foreign policy responses. Instead, it focuses on the role of religion in the construction of a European identity – as a constitutive factor or as an identity marker. With this thesis, I do not intend to determine whether religion does play a role in the construction of a European identity. Rather, I aim to establish how religion can be instrumentalized by the EU to justify its foreign policy responses in seemingly different case scenarios: Russia and Israel.

Despite this, I recognize that the existing literature on the role of religion in the construction of a European identity can intersect with the instrumentalization of religion in foreign policy, making it an appropriate point from which to depart. Given this, I start by providing the reader with a review of the scholarly debates on the role of religion in the creation of a European identity, followed by a review of the use of religion as an identity marker, and concluding with an overview of the instrumentalization of religion at the European level both to demarcate its internal identity and in relation with other countries.

2.1 Religion, Secularism and the European Union

To say that religion is absent from European politics, and, by extension, the EU's foreign policy would be erroneous. One simply has to look at the Preamble to the Treaty of Lisbon (2009) to note how religion continues to influence the EU. Indeed, the signatory parties stated that the EU draws inspiration not only from the cultural and humanist heritage of Europe but also from its religious past (Lähdesmäki, 2022, p.174). Despite this, the EU is frequently seen as the ultimate area of secularism, as it is built on both the positive and negative dimensions of religious freedom (Klimova, 2020, pp.619-620). This implies that the EU ensures the right to practice – or not to practice – religion, supports religious diversity, and prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion (Klimova, 2020, p.620). Given this, it is logical that one might conclude that the EU is relatively a safe haven for religious people and religious minorities.

However, as Klimova (2020, p.628) and Lähdesmäki (2022, p.182) argue, secularism should not be confused with atheism or the absence of religion. Rather, it should be understood as a non-affiliation to any particular confession. Building on this, Lähdesmäki (2022) argues that

the EU should be understood as a post-secular society, "characterized by a multifaceted adaptation to various ongoing religious tensions in a largely secular environment" (p.173). Within this type of society, religion is *culturalized*, that is, it is increasingly treated as part of a broader cultural heritage rather than as a belief system (Lähdesmäki, 2022, p.173). In line with the arguments presented by Klimova (2020) and Lähdesmäki (2022), King (2016, pp.9-47) also argues that the idea that European politics – and the wider process of European integration – are independent from religion is inaccurate.

To demonstrate this further, I draw on the arguments made by Hurd (2008) in *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*. The author differentiates between two forms of secularism: laicism and Judeo-Christian secularism. On the one hand, laicism views religion as an obstacle to modern politics. This rather negative view of religion is not surprising since it arose out of the Enlightenment critique of religion, which supported the total eradication of religion from the political realm (Hurd, 2008, p.23). Proponents of laicism argue that the Christian identity of Western societies has been rendered irrelevant, if not eradicated altogether (Hurd, 2008, p.39). On the other hand, Judeo-Christian secularism can be defined as a discursive tradition that considers religion to be a source of unity and identity – as well as of conflict – and that aims "to negotiate the modern relationship between religion and politics" (Hurd, 2008, pp.23–38). In response to the claims made by proponents of laicism, Judeo-Christian secularists argue that religion continues to play an important role in Western politics and identity (Hurd, 2008, p.39).

More importantly, Judeo-Christian secularism associates modern Western secular configurations to a legacy of Christian – and later Judeo-Christian – "values, culture, religious beliefs, historical practices, legal traditions, governing institutions, and forms of identification" (Hurd, 2008, p.38). In other words, Western political systems are founded on values and norms which arise from a Judeo-Christian tradition. As a result, Judeo-Christian secularists inherently frame secularism as a purely Western achievement for it arose from a shared adherence to common European religious and political traditions, that is Christianity and Judaism (Hurd, 2008, pp.23-42). This, in turn, has numerous implications. On the one side, it inherently divides the world into those who share Judeo-Christian norms and those who do not (Hurd, 2008, p.43). On the other side, it constructs and reinforces a hierarchy between these two categories whereby those who share Judeo-Christian norms are implicitly seen as superior to those who do not (Hurd, 2008, p.43). What becomes evident from this then is that secularism not only is

not a neutral concept – for it arises from Judeo-Christian values – but it is an inherently civilizational concept – as it is associated with Western civilizations.

Although laicism and Judeo-Christian secularism are not mutually exclusive, I argue that the EU adopts a Judeo-Christian conceptualization of secularism. The reason as to why this is the case is mainly because the EU does not force religion out of the political sphere. Beyond the Preamble to the Treaty of Lisbon (2009), the EU also actively engages with religious institutions and organizations, thereby making it susceptible to religious influences (Lähdesmäki, 2022, p.174). Building on this – and as is explored further later – the possible accession of Turkey into the EU, demonstrates further how religion continues to play an important role in European politics, serving as a key factor in the portrayal of certain countries as European and other countries as non-European – geographically as well as culturally.

2.2 Religion, Othering and Far-Right Political Parties

Although the existing literature typically focuses on far-right political parties, I believe that exploring the underlying mechanisms through which these actors create an Other is an important point of departure to understand how the EU might instrumentalize religion in the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people. As Bottici and Challand (2013, pp.146-147), Peker (2022, p.2), and Smeets (2024, p.27) argue, religion can act as an identity marker to create an internal Self and external Other. On the one hand, religion can help determine the criteria of membership and, subsequently, answer the question of who belongs (Smeets, 2024, p.27). On the other hand, religion can help provide the content for the identity of the internal Self, and, by extension, answer the question of who one is (Smeets, 2024, p.27). Therefore, the construction of the inner group is always delineated and determined by the characteristics of the outer group – including, but not limited to, their religious affiliation –implying that the internal Self defines itself not by who it is, but by who it is not – that is, the external Other (Bottici & Challand, 2013, p.146; Smeets, 2024, p.28). From this it becomes evident that the inner group and the outer group are social constructs, meaning that they are not fixed categories but can instead change over time, whereby novel criteria are used to do so (Smeets, 2024, p.28). This is important to consider for the purpose of my thesis, because it allows to explain how the EU might instrumentalize religion differently – and, subsequently, behave contradictorily – over time and across cases to justify its foreign policy responses.

Interestingly, the creation of an internal Self and an external Other along religious lines has started to gain popularity across far-right parties in Europe only in recent years (Bottici &

Challand, 2013, p.146; Peker, 2022). As Peker (2022, p.1) contends, far-right political parties in post-war Europe did not express their xenophobic and anti-immigrant beliefs with outspoken and explicit allusions to religion. Until the 1980s, Islam was seen as an oriental religion and as the faith of migrants who were seen as temporary guests that would eventually return to their country of origin (Foret, 2015, pp.216-217). However, as acknowledgement of the long-term and sizeable presence of Muslims – who were increasingly asking for recognition – grew, Islam began to be problematized (Foret, 2015, p.217). And with the turn to the 21st century, far-right political parties became more outspoken in their demarcation of an internal Self and an external Other along religious lines.

Building on this, these parties instrumentalize religion to essentially frame a Christian or secular Europe "seemingly under siege from Islamic terrorism and non-Christian immigration" (Nelsen & Guth, p.86). What is particularly interesting about this, is that it does not necessarily occur by framing the Christian identity of Europe in purely religious terms. Rather – and as it was seen earlier – it can happen by treating Christianity as an intrinsic aspect of European heritage, thereby resulting in the culturalization of religion (Lähdesmäki, 2022, p.173). This instrumentalization of religion began to gain traction particularly considering the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in 2001 and the refugee crises of 2015. These events made Islam as well as Muslim immigration an extremely important political issue and led to debates across the board on "the cultural antagonism between Muslims and Europeans" (Wolkenstein, 2023, p.644).

As Peker (2022, pp.3-8) contends, it can also happen by arguing that Christianity is conducive to secularism and social liberal values while arguing that Islam is incompatible with any such values. In doing so, far-right political parties successfully problematize Islam and Muslims who are seen as diametrically opposed with the broader progressive values attributed to a Christian European tradition (Peker, 2022, p.8). Interestingly, as they do so, far-right political parties typically refrain from making direct references to religious ethics, practices, and institutions (Smeets, 2024, p.28). What becomes evident from this then is the inherently civilizational undercurrent of far-right political discourse, which provides far-right political parties with a basis to justify their anti-immigration and plainly Islamophobic party positions. This is in line with the argument presented by Kratochvíl (2019, p.79), whereby he argues that far-right political parties have successfully reconciled Christianity and secularity as markers of civilization and Islam and Oriental ethnic features as markers of barbarism. What this points to then is that the new cleavage that has risen does not follow the classic dichotomy of religious

vs. secular. Instead, it gives rise to "the colonial division between the civilized and the barbaric, both of which contain religious and non-religious elements" (Kratochvíl, 2019, p.78)

Such a thing reinforces the point made by numerous authors in the previous section, whereby they argued that not only is secularism not a neutral concept or the equivalent of absence of religion, but that secularism is rooted in a Judeo-Christian tradition. Above all, it underscores an important point that I am trying to make with this thesis. As Smeets (2024, p.29-31) argues, religion can be instrumentalized in a way whereby the reification of a civilizational identity is based (primarily) on religion – this refers to religious civilizationalism. Consequently, religion can be instrumentalized as part of a wider civilizational discourse, allowing political actors including the EU to frame certain states and populations as part of or as similar to the European Self and others as part of the external Other, thereby justifying differences in foreign policy responses across scenarios. Before delving any deeper into the topic at hand, it is important to note that such religiously inflected divisions characterize – including, but not limited to, far-right political parties – party positions such as the endorsement for Israel in the Middle East. Peker (2022) points to the growing trend of far-right parties to "move away from […] antisemitism to philosemitism" (p.10), whereby they frame Judaism and Jews as part of a European civilization and as fellow victims of Islam. However, Peker (2022, p.11) argues that such a turn is done as a way to push away and exclude Muslim immigrants rather than out of benevolence for Jews.

2.3 Religion, Othering and the European Union

However, this process of demarcating an internal Self and an external Other does not limit itself to far-right political parties. Although the literature on the topic is not as prominent, some scholars rightfully point out that Europe as a political project also falls prey to this process (Bottici & Challand, 2013; Diez, 2005; Foret, 2015). In this section, I do not intend to argue that the EU implemented a process of Othering along religious lines. Rather, I aim to provide the reader with an overview of the literature on how this process might apply to the wider European project, thereby shifting the focus from specifically far-right political parties to Europe as a political entity. As Bottici and Challand (2013, p.147) argue, the creation of a European political entity is a rather fragile project. Since its conception, it has been limited to a few European elites which in itself points to "a concomitant, diffuse perception of the lack of a clear internal legitimacy" (Bottici & Challand, 2013, p.147). What this implies then is that the European project lacks a strong, widely accepted foundation of legitimacy, making it feel

distant or disconnected from the wider European population. Given this then, the authors argue that the EU must often rely on the existence of an external Other in order to create a sense of belonging or as they say "a sense of common fate within such a sui generis political entity" (Bottici & Challand, 2013, p.147).

Building on this, Diez (2005) makes a similar argument – albeit, starting from a different point of departure. The author argues that the EU has come to be conceived as a novel kind of power, that is, a normative power which is said "to pursue the spread of particular norms, rather than geographical expansion or military superiority" (Diez, 2005, p.613). However, Diez (2005, p.627) argues that the narrative of normative power Europe essentially constructs the identity of the EU as well as the identity of the EU's Others in ways which allow the EU to ignore its failures. In essence, the EU's claim to normativity, allows it to construct itself as a better Self, and, by extension, to prevent it from actually achieving said normativity for it lacks the ability to reflect on its failures (Diez, 2005, p.626).

As Bottici and Challand (2013, p.146) proceed to argue, religion is one of the many possible ways the European project can create an internal Self and an external Other, yet, and similarly to the case of far-right political parties, this was not always done along religious lines. During the early stages of European integration, this process of Othering typically manifested itself along geopolitical lines. In particular, Eastern European countries under communist rule and/or with close ties to the USSR, were seen as the inherent Other to Western European countries (Bottici & Challand, 2013, p.147). It was only after the fall of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, that the criteria for this process of Othering shifted from geopolitical lines to increasingly religious lines (Bottici & Challand, 2013, p.147).

Building on this, Asad (2003) makes an interesting point about Europe the process of Othering. In particular, Asad (2003, p.168) argues that it is those that fall within the civilizational framing that are considered true, genuine Europeans. He then makes the important claim that until after WWII, European Jews were marginal to this civilizational framing, yet "the emerging discourse of a 'Judeo-Christian tradition' […] signalled a new integration of their status into Europe" (Asad, 2003, p.168). Given the purpose of my thesis, this is essential to keep into consideration. By framing Jews and Judaism as part of the wider European civilization, one might assume that the EU might instrumentalize religion to justify its limited action in response to the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people.

Therefore, it becomes evident that this process of Othering applies to the wider European project and has happened along different criteria as European integration advanced – including religion. To develop this argument further, in *Religion and Politics in the European Union: The Secular Canopy*, Foret (2015) delves deeper into the intersection between the role of religion and the external identity of the EU. Similarly to Bottici & Challand (2013), Foret (2015) argues that Europe as a political community defines its identity by differentiating itself from other polities, with religion coming into play at three levels: 1) in what the EU is, 2) in where it is positioned "within a religiously framed world system" and 3) in its foreign policy (p.241). Having already explored the 1st level – that is, how religion can act as an identity marker – I would like to move on the 3rd level, for its focus on foreign policy can provide important insights.

Through his findings, Foret (2015, p.241) concludes that European policy makers are themselves aware of the role religion might play in international relations, thereby reinforcing the point made by other scholars in previous sections that religion is not external to politics and, specifically, to European politics. Building on this, he finds that the EU deals with religion differently depending on how far away from home the issue is. What he means by this is that religion is dealt with pragmatism and flexibility when it is far away from the EU's external borders. Meanwhile, it gains increasing salience when it is closer to the EU's territorial borders. The reason as to why this is the case is because when foreign events involving religious factors occur within proximity, they can directly challenge the collective identity of the Union. As it was previously seen, religion can serve as a foundation for collective identity – such as by acting as an identity marker. Although the EU claims to be secular, secularism is not a neutral concept, and it is rooted in a Judeo-Christian tradition. Consequently, the EU can claim to be secular, yet one might in turn claim that this secularism characterizes the EU's collective identity, thereby making it more attentive to religious factors when these risk challenging secularism and, with it, the EU's collective identity.

This can be clearly seen in the EU's attitudes towards Turkey and its accession process – albeit that process might no longer be on the table. As Bottici and Challand (2013, p.153) and Foret (2015, p.241) contend, the reluctance surrounding Turkey's possible accession to the EU was framed along religious lines. On the one hand, the country's predominantly Muslim population was seen as a direct challenge to Europe's collective identity. In this regard, Bottici and Challand (2013) mention the statement by former President of France, Valerie Giscard D'Estaing, where he essentially claimed that "Europe would lose its soul were it to accept a

Muslim majority country as part of the European club" (p.154). On the other hand, Turkey is seen as a much more religious than Europe as a whole, which at the time of the accession talks, could have been considered a factor disturbing the secularity of the community (Foret, 2015, p.242). Regardless, it all comes down to the fact that Turkey's possible accession was seen as a direct challenge to Europe's collective identity – a challenge that was framed along religious lines.

Given this, it should not come as a surprise that religion can also serve as a means to justify foreign policy responses. Although Foret (2015, p.241) argues that religion becomes an increasingly salient factor when it is in close proximity, he also contends that religion can act as a basis to justify solidarity with minorities of the same denomination while simultaneously justify inaction, indifference and, all in all, support for the aggressor. To develop this further, since secularism is not a neutral concept, and it is rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition it follows that the EU might be partial to civilizations who adopt a similar tradition. Consequently, the EU might instrumentalize religion in such a way as to frame certain countries as part or as similar to a wider European civilization, thereby justifying its foreign policy responses in support of said countries. Alternatively, it might instrumentalize religion in such a way as to frame other countries as fundamentally different from itself, thereby justifying its foreign policy responses in opposition to said countries.

Chapter 3 – The Path to Understanding

As I previously mention, the body of literature exploring the intersection of religion, foreign policy, and the EU remains relatively limited, presenting challenges for drawing definitive conclusions. Consequently, with this section I outline a theoretical framework designed to complement the literature review and serve as the foundation for the analysis that follows. In particular, I employ postcolonial theory (Bhambra, 2022; Sen, 2021) – whereby I refer to the concept of normative empire Europe (Del Sarto, 2016) – and grievability theory as developed by Judith Butler (2009). Before delving into the theories themselves, allow me to explain why they provide the most appropriate lenses for my analysis.

On the one hand, postcolonial theory offers a critical perspective on how the legacy of colonialism continues to shape contemporary politics, particularly in terms of value, power, and morality. This perspective is crucial for my analysis, as it demonstrates how the EU's foreign policy discourse is not neutral, but rather a continuation of colonial legacies that frame certain societies as "civilized" or "barbaric". As it was discussed in the previous section, political actors can instrumentalize religion to frame certain societies with a broader European civilization, thereby reinforcing colonial hierarchies. Therefore, postcolonial theory is especially relevant for examining how the EU might instrumentalize religion to justify its foreign policy responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people.

Within the framework of post-colonial theory, the concept of normative empire Europe can refine this perspective further. By addressing the intersection of material interest and normative identity, this concept offers a theoretical foundation to understand why the EU's responses might differ in the cases of Russia and Israel despite its supposedly universal values. In particular, it allows me to account for how the EU might instrumentalize religion to justify action in certain cases and inaction in other cases.

On the other hand, grievability theory explores how certain lives are made more visible, more worthy of protection, and, as the name suggests, more grievable. With its focus on frames, this is particularly relevant for examining how the EU might instrumentalize religion to construct hierarchies of grievability and, in, turn, justify the differential treatment of Ukrainian and Palestinian lives – and, by extension, different foreign policy responses to Russian and Israeli violence. Additionally, it aligns seamlessly with postcolonial theory. Beyond providing a framework for analysing how the EU might instrumentalize religion to construct hierarchies of

grievability, it also allows for a deeper exploration of how these hierarchies may reflect and perpetuate colonial legacies.

3.1 Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory takes issue with the typical optimistic and encouraging history of how Europe as it is known today came into existence. Indeed, Europe is frequently framed as the prime example of what peaceful integration looks like and how past nationalisms can be overcome. As a White, Southern European woman who has mainly benefitted from European integration, I am aware that I can cave in to the narrative of the EU as a purely benevolent actor. Acknowledging the past of one's country can be difficult for it asks one to not only take accountability for the atrocities committed beyond one's country's borders but also to deconstruct what one has been taught. However, doing so is imperative academically as well as societally. As Bhambra (2022) states, the narrative often promulgated by European leaders and countries completely omits "the dismantling of another world order" (p.2). Consequently, it is only by actively considering the historical legacy of colonialism and imperialism that one can understand why hierarchies of power, value, and morality manifest as they do today – and, above all, why they favour certain countries and peoples while simultaneously subjecting others to war, inequality, persecution, and discrimination.

The EU is not simply a peace project, but also an inherently post-colonial endeavour. As Bhambra (2022, p.6) and Sen (2021, p.49) argue, the legacies of colonial rule can be found in the foundations of the EU, particularly, in its relations with third countries. Starting from the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), they contend that the ECSC was a continuation of the European colonial project. According to Bhambra (2022, p.6), the negotiations leading up to the establishment of the ECSC took place at a time when Europe was socially, politically, and economically fragmented, placing it in a relatively weak geopolitical position. More importantly, the negotiations were founded on the idea that natural resources from African countries were at the disposition of European countries and the wider European project, without ever including the countries under subjugation in the negotiation process (Bhambra, 2022, p.6). Similarly, Sen (2021, p.49) argues that the ECSC was a way through which European countries could rationalize the management of the colonies by making it a concern and responsibility of all. A remarkable instance of this, can be found in the 1975 Lome Convention. While from the perspective of the Global South signatories the Convention represented an opportunity to secure trade and development commitments from European countries, from the perspective of

these countries, the Convention was a legitimate way to address their economic concerns as former colonies progressively gaining independence from them (Sen, 2021, p.49).

While Europe typically ignores its colonial past, Sen (2021, p.48) argues that the legacy of colonialism is fundamental to the current international system. Starting from the Westphalian understanding of the nation-state, Bhambra (2022, p.4) takes issue with the fact that European countries are typically framed as nation-states rather than imperial states. Indeed, by framing European countries as nation-states, one inherently fails to recognize the power and violence they exerted beyond their borders. More importantly, by framing European countries along these lines, one directly fails to acknowledge how the Westphalian conception of the nation-state – whereby countries must respect the sovereignty of other countries – only applied to European countries. Indeed, Bhambra (2022) argues that "sovereignty was only to be respected in relation to other European powers" while simultaneously and entirely disregarded in encounters with countries and peoples beyond European borders (p.5). Given this, it should not come as a surprise that most colonized countries and peoples were given independency and, subsequently, recognized as sovereign only during the 20th century.

Within the context of this thesis, it should then not come as a surprise that the EU might instrumentalize religion to justify its foreign policy responses. On the one hand, this can involve framing certain countries and peoples as European and, by extension, sovereign. As a result, an attack on their sovereignty is seen as an intolerable affront that demands action. On the other hand, it can involve framing other countries and peoples as non-European, making their sovereignty less significant or unworthy of the same respect. As a result, an attack on their sovereignty is not seen as a genuine violation, justifying inaction or only limited responses. It is important to note that when I refer to European or non-European here, I am not speaking strictly in geographical terms. Rather, I am referring to an identitarian dimension, where European is understood through supposed shared commonalities, not just physical borders.

Similarly, Sen (2021, pp.48-49) explores the legacies of colonial rule on the international political system at the discursive level as well as at the material level. Starting from the discursive level, Sen (2021, p.48) argues that the European conception of political modernity found global resonance through colonialism. Through colonialism European powers could impose their own understanding of political modernity and, by extension, suppress the proliferation of non-European understandings of the concept on the international stage (Sen, 2021, p.48). In this way then, European powers could establish an intellectual hierarchy where

European political thought occupies a central role and the European conception of political modernity is seen as synonymous with the structure of the international political system, thereby determining power relations to this day (Sen, 2021, p.48). However, the consequences of colonialism do not limit themselves to the discursive dimension. As Sen (2021) proceeds to argue, the establishment of an intellectual hierarchy centred around European supremacy "also codified (into law) the colonial hierarchies into the 'disciplinary structures' of the international political system" (p.49). In doing so, European powers were able – and are still able – to establish the criteria for determining the legitimacy of politics and resistance movements in non-European countries, particularly in the Global South. In this way, they could – and can – then ensure that their material and geopolitical interests were – and are – not jeopardized by political developments outside of their territorial borders (Sen, 2021, p.49).

This is particularly important to consider within the context of this thesis. With the concept of political modernity and the international system being centred around European supremacy, it is logical that only certain claims to independence and sovereignty will be seen as legitimate. As Sen (2021, p.49) argues, such claims are seen as legitimate when they apply to countries that are seen as European. This reinforces the argument presented by Bhambra (2022, p.5), whereby European powers respected the concept of sovereignty only in relation to other European countries. As it was seen in the literature review, religion can serve as a useful tool to differentiate between societies, and frame certain countries and peoples as European and others as non-European. Consequently, the EU might instrumentalize religion in such a way so as to frame countries differently and, thereby, justify its foreign policy responses across cases.

3.2 Normative Empire Europe

Amongst the most prominent ways in which the EU has been defined, the concept of *Normative Power Europe* (NPE) presented by Ian Manners (2002) stands out. Building on this, the EU is defined as a normative power due to its ability to advance the norms it supposedly supports beyond its territorial borders and, by extension, determine what is considered normal on the international stage without resorting to the use of force or coercion (Manners, 2002, p.242). Additionally, the EU is considered a normative power due to its supposed commitment to the norms central to its treaties, declarations, policies, criteria, and conditions, even if such a commitment might go against its material and geopolitical interests. Essentially, the EU leads by example (Manners, 2002, p.244). On this note, Manners (2002, p.241) argues that the EU gains its normative character for in its promulgation of norms in third countries it does so in

accordance with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), unlike other polities. While the framework presented by Manners (2002) is compelling to say the least, numerous scholars have come to question the normative nature of the EU, especially within the context of post-colonial theory. Indeed, Sen (2021, p.47) argues that the normative power of the EU should be seen as a continuation of colonial legacies for it not only undermines ideologies coming from other parts of the world but also assumes that said parts of the world lack these values. More importantly, NPE fails to recognize the contradictions of the EU's behaviour in relation to third countries. It is from this limitation of NPE that del Sarto (2016) presents the concept of *Normative Empire Europe*.

Although the EU has been actively exporting its rules and practices to neighbouring countries, it is important to note these are fundamentally different "from those norms stipulated in the 'normative power Europe concept'" (del Sarto, 2016, p.220). Rather, they focus on the convergence of regulations, economic governance, and border controls, the last one aiming at preventing the entrance of undesired migrants into the EU (del Sarto, 2016, p.220). Of course, one might argue that by promoting rules and practices in these areas, that the EU might be indirectly promoting universal norms such as the rule of law. This would then justify the conceptualization of the EU as a normative power rather than as a normative empire. However, del Sarto (2016, p.221) rightfully argues that, for instance, the promotion of rules and practices of good governance does not inherently result in the promotion of democracy. Given this, one might then wonder why the EU focuses on the convergence of regulations, economic governance, and border controls if this does not ultimately lead to the promotion of the norms it claims to support. Following this, del Sarto (2016, p.220) provides two distinct, yet interconnected, answers. On the one side, this is because of the EU's way of operating towards neighbouring countries, where it advances its economic and security interests in a cost-effective way (del Sarto, 2016, p.220). On the other side, this is because "the EU does what it does because of what it is", meaning, a normative empire with a civilizing mission (del Sarto, 2016, p.220).

Among the many advantages it has, the conceptualization of the EU as a normative empire allows for the EU to retain its perception as a normative power while simultaneously explain why the promotion of the norms it supposedly upholds are not always a priority, especially in neighbouring countries. By framing the export of rules and practices as a way to promote norms, the EU can continue to claim to be a normative power even if the transfer of such rules and practices does not ultimately result in the implementation of these values. In other words, the

EU can continue to claim to be a normative power because the intention of exporting norms was supposedly there, even if they did not become reality. Additionally, and connected to this, it allows to account for what is frequently seen as contradictory behaviour in the EU's relations with third countries and, by extension, its stance on external crises. While in the case of prospective member states (MS), the EU actively ensures that certain standards with regards to democracy, the rule of law, and human rights are maintained – as set out in the Copenhagen Criteria of 1993 – the same does not apply to neighbouring countries without the prospect of membership (del Sarto, 2016, pp.222-223). In this case, the EU might not be as adamant in ensuring that certain standards in terms of democratic governance, the rule of law, and human rights, if doing so runs counter to its economic and security interests (del Sarto, 2016, pp.222-223).

Building on this, it would then make sense why the EU has been vocal in its condemnation of Russia and its war waged against Ukraine, while it has been a staunch supporter of Israel despite its genocide of the Palestinian people. On the one hand, one might make the case that the EU's support of Ukraine and, by extension, its condemnation of Russia is not purely due to Russia undermining and bluntly attacking the norms the EU stands for. With Ukraine dividing Russia from the rest of Europe, it acts as a *stato cuscinetto*, that is, a buffer state. Consequently, it is in the EU's best interests to support Ukraine for it is the only country standing between a possible attack on European MSs. On the other hand, one might argue that a similar logic applies in the case of the EU's support of Israel and silence and, by extension, complicity in the genocide of the Palestinian people. With Israel having one of the predominantly non-Muslim populations in the Middle East and being one of biggest allies of the Western world in a region of the world that is often seen by Western politicians as hostile, it is logical then that the EU would be a staunch supporter. Given this, one might then stipulate that the EU instrumentalizes religion in such a way as to justify its support for Ukraine and Israel respectively.

3.3 Grievability Theory

In their *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Judith Butler (2016) focuses on war and, more specifically, on the reasons which make it easier or more difficult to wage war. Despite their focus on war, this theory provides an important lens through which to analyse how the EU instrumentalizes religion to justify its foreign policy responses to Russian and Israeli violence. Before delving into the theory itself, I want to make an important consideration.

Starting from an epistemological perspective, Butler (2016) argues that the capacity to apprehend a life is partially reliant "on that life being produced according to norms that qualify it as a life" (p.28). What this implies is that norms affect what is seen and, subsequently, what is thought to be a person. This inherently creates an ethical problem of how to protect people from harm and violence if they are not apprehended as people to begin with. Building on this ethical dilemma, Butler (2016, pp.26-50) differentiates between recognition and recognizability. On the one hand, they define recognition as the full acknowledgement that someone is a person with rights. On the other hand, they define recognizability as "the more general conditions that prepare a subject for recognition" (Butler, 2016, p.28). By defining recognizability in this way then it becomes evident that: a) only if a subject falls under the general criteria of recognizability can they then be recognized as a person with rights; b) recognizability is the stage necessary for recognition to occur.

However, Butler (2016, pp.26-50) makes the important point that recognizability does not universally apply to all persons for their sake of being persons. As it was previously mentioned, the apprehension of a life is partially dependent on norms. As they point out, the norms through which a life is understood as such are not neutral but politically charged, or as Butler (2016) states, "they are themselves operations of power" (p.26). With norms being a result of power dynamics, it is logical then that not all persons are recognizable as persons and, subsequently, that they will not be recognized as persons with rights. By applying this logic within the framework of this thesis, one might then argue that religion can then be instrumentalized to construct norms to ultimately make certain people recognizable – and, by extension, recognized – while simultaneously making other people invisible

Delving deeper into the role of norms for the recognition and recognizability of persons, Butler (2016, pp.26-50) argues that norms can clash and are themselves subject to change. In line with the argument presented by the author, I want to point out to the important implications that this claim has. On the one side, it allows to explain why political actors might act differently in the face of death and destruction as well as how they can justify such different responses. Indeed, by contending that norms can clash with each other, one might argue that different norms along which to define recognition, recognizability, and subsequently, life, can exist at the same time. Thus, in the context of the EU's foreign policy responses to Russian and Israeli violence, the EU might instrumentalize religion in one way in one case and in another way in another case, thereby defining life differently across cases. On the other side, it allows to explain why political actors might treat certain groups of people differently over time – such as by initially

not apprehending their life, only to apprehend it later. Therefore, in the context of the EU's foreign policy responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people, the EU might instrumentalize religion to frame certain lives as lives only to instrumentalize it differently later down the line to not frame them as lives, thereby explaining why its foreign policy responses might change over time.

Building on this, Butler (2016, pp.26-50) introduces the concept of precariousness and argues that the apprehension of precariousness is also dependent on norms that are politically charged. They argue that to claim that a life is precarious implies that a life is not only seen as a life but as a life that is at risk and subject to harm and suffering. However, since the concept of precariousness is politically constructed, only the precariousness of certain people might be recognized while that of other people might be ignored altogether. This is extremely important to take into consideration, particularly given the purpose of my thesis. With the concept of precariousness being politically constructed, one might argue that the EU instrumentalizes religion in such a way that allows to frame the life of certain people as precarious while simultaneously framing that of other people as not precarious. This would then allow it to justify its foreign policy responses across different cases, in a way that is consistent with its supposedly universal norms.

It is within this framework that the concept of grievability emerges. Butler (2016, pp.26-50) argues that for a living being to live it is essential that they are cared for. However, care is not a given; rather, it arises only when the loss of said living being would matter. As Butler (2016, pp.26-50) argues, if one cannot imagine themselves grieving the loss of a person's life, it does not make any difference to them if said person lives or dies. It is only when one can imagine themselves grieving the loss of a person's life that their life is seen as valuable and thus as calling forth care. Consequently, it becomes evident that without grievability, it does not matter if the life of a person is at risk and, subsequently, whether they receive the proper care to survive, as their death would not be considered a loss. What this implies then is that the apprehension grievability is a prerequisite for a life to be seen as a precarious life and, by extension, to be taken care of. This has important implications for the subject of my thesis, particularly in explaining the how the EU might instrumentalize religion to justify foreign policy responses in the cases of Russian and Israeli violence. On the one hand, it might to do in a way that frames certain lives as grievable and, subsequently, as subject to precarious conditions, thereby condemning the attack of the aggressor and calling forth action to ensure that they are cared

for. On the other hand, it might do so in a way that frames the loss of other lives not as grievable and, by extension, not as mattering, ultimately justifying inaction or only limited action.

Chapter 4 – Holy Frontlines

In this section, I outline the two case studies chosen: the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people. In particular, I examine the EU's current relationships with Russia and Israel, as well as the actions it has taken in response to the incremental violence against Ukrainians and Palestinians. In doing so, I aim to underscore both the stark contrasts in the EU's foreign policy responses. These differences, I believe invite one to ask how the EU might then instrumentalize religion to justify its foreign policy responses across case studies. While it is important to consider the measures the EU has taken to directly support Ukraine, given my focus on how the EU instrumentalizes religion to justify its foreign policy response to Russian and Israeli violence specifically and the practical constraints of this thesis, I limit myself to analyze the measures it has taken directly against Russia and Israel. To ensure clarity and coherence, I first explore the case of Russia and Ukraine, followed by the case of Israel and Palestine.

Before I delve any further, I believe it is important to briefly make a consideration. As I reiterate in the following sections, the violence perpetrated by Russia and Israel did not happen in a vacuum nor is it surprising. The stances Russia and Israel have towards Ukrainians and Palestinians, respectively, are fundamentally imperial and colonial. On the one hand, Russia does not see Ukraine as an independent sovereign country, but rather, as an extension of itself and, thus, as to be conquered. On the other hand, Israel has colonized a land that it has often described – alongside European countries – as a deserted land, portraying itself as the carrier of civilization and Palestinians as backwards. This is important to take into consideration to underline that, once again, Russian and Israeli violence did not start on the 24th of February 2022, or on the 7th of October 2023. And while I unfortunately do not have the space to do so here, accounting for the historical legacy of Russia and Israel's violence is key to understand how we got here today.

4.1 Russia and the European Union

On February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the start of a "special military operation" against Ukraine (Staff, 2022). This came shortly after Russia formally recognized the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine (Staff, 2022). While much of the Western world reacted with shock to the full-scale invasion, calling it surprising overlooks Russia's long-standing imperial

stance toward Ukraine (Hendl et al., 2024, pp.172-174). Events such as the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 had already made the intentions of the Kremlin increasingly clear – or at least, they should have. As Hendl et al. (2024) state, the extremity of Russia's rhetoric and the brutality of its actions "are indeed shocking; but they should not have been surprising" (p.172).

Tensions between the EU and Russia had been on the rise since the late 2000s (Haukkala, 2015, p.31). However, it was the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 which ultimately made the EU take a "diametrically opposing stance to Russia" (Siddi et al., 2024, p.11). As a result, the EU introduced a number of targeted, diplomatic sanctions against Russian officials as well as economic sanctions affecting the entire Russian economy. However, to say that this severed European and Russian relations is erroneous. On the contrary, Russia maintained its role as the main energy provider for most of the EU MSs, thereby, retaining a certain degree of influence over the EU as a whole. Although the EU did at this time make some efforts to diversify its energy sector and, by extension, limit Russia's influence, many MSs – such as, but not limited to, Italy and Germany – maintained most of the energy deals made before the Russian annexation of Crimea and, in some cases, even went ahead to sign new agreements (Nitoiu, 2017, p.154). Building on this, the EU MSs failed to maintain a united front in the face of Russian hostility and violence against Ukraine. While some MSs were in favor of harsher measures against Russia, some MSs – once again, Italy – went as far as to oppose the implementation of additional sanctions and even attempted to change certain aspects of the already implemented sanctions (Siddi et al., 2024, p.18).

It was only with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 that the EU took what has been described as unprecedented action against Russia and in support of Ukraine. As of April 2025, the EU has introduced a total of 16 sanctions packages against Russia and its supporters, affecting the Russian trade and finance sectors and, subsequently, the country's economy as a whole (*Solidarity with Ukraine*, n.d.). In combination with the asset freezes of over 2,400 individuals and entities inside and outside of Russia, the EU has frozen approximately €210 billion in assets of the Russian Central Bank, which it has prohibited from accessing the Union's capital markets and SWIFT system (*Solidarity with Ukraine*, n.d.). Additionally, it has banned a total of €48 billion in goods to be exported from the EU to Russia and a total of €91 billion in goods to be imported from Russia to the EU (*Solidarity with Ukraine*, n.d.). Furthermore, it has obstructed the Russian aviation sector such as by imposing a ban on "exports, sales, supply or transfer of all aircraft, and a closure of EU airspace to all Russian aircraft" (*Solidarity with Ukraine*, n.d.). However, the most notable measures taken by the EU

regard the energy sector, especially if one considers the EU's historical dependency on Russian gas. Not only has the EU banned the import of Russian seaborne crude oil and refined petroleum products, but it has also introduced price caps alongside the International G7+ Price Cap Coalition, thereby negatively affecting Russian profits (*Solidarity with Ukraine*, n.d.). More importantly, it has banned the transshipment of Russian liquified natural gas through EU ports and it has put an end to the imports of Russian coal and liquified petroleum gas, thereby considerably reducing its dependency on Russia's energy sector (*Solidarity with Ukraine*, n.d.).

4.2 Israel and the European Union

On October 7, 2023, Hamas militants attacked Israel, resulting in the killing of approximately 1,200 people and the taking of more than 250 people as hostages. What then followed, quickly escalated into the genocide of Palestinians by Israel – not only through military force but also by preventing them from accessing safe, clean water and humanitarian aid as well as stealing children from Palestinian families to give them to Israeli ones (*'You Feel Like You Are Subhuman': Israel's Genocide Against Palestinians in Gaza*, n.d.; *Israel's Crime of Extermination, Acts of Genocide in Gaza | Human Rights Watch*, 2024). Indeed, on January 26, 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered Israel to take all measures necessary to prevent genocidal acts, as well as to prevent and punish the incitement to genocide (Gaza: World Court Orders Israel to Prevent Genocide | Human Rights Watch, 2024). However, since October 7, 2023, at least 46,100 Palestinians have been killed and more than 111,000 have been injured (*Palestine*—European Commission*, 2025b). Despite this, Western governments have failed to take concrete action or even explicitly condemn Israel's brutal violence, continuously reiterating that it has a right to defend itself (Purohit, 2023).

Although the EU is the largest third-party provider of assistance to the Palestinians, it has unfortunately fallen into a similar trend as other Western political entities, failing to take concrete action to punish Israel's crimes – at least, during the time that this thesis was written (*Palestine*—European Commission*, 2025a). However, this does not come as a surprise given the long-standing relationship between the EU and Israel. With the turn to the 1970s, the EU – then the European Community – increasingly formalized its relationship with Israel, first with a five-year preferential agreement in 1970 and then with a cooperation agreement in 1975 (King, 2016, p.66; Bouris & Fernández-Molina, 2024, p.5). This ultimately culminated in the Association Agreement (AA), which entered into force in 2000 (Bouris & Fernández-Molina, 2024, p.5). Through this agreement, the EU and Israel expanded existing agreements of free

trade to include “the liberalization of services, the free movement of capital and competition rules” (King, 2016, p.66). The AA later expanded to include the agricultural sector, leading to the mutual liberalization of agricultural products, as well as fish and fishery products (King, 2016, p.66). Despite this, it is important to note that with settlement activity and settlers’ violence increasing in the West Bank, as well as East Jerusalem, the EU froze any further development in the AA for several years. Although this might indicate some commitment by the EU to ensure Israel complies with international law and, by extension, the norms the EU supposedly upholds, economic cooperation between the two did not stop and instead expanded further. Indeed, in the following years, the EU came to formally accept the authority of Israel on goods made in settlements in the West Bank (King, 2016, p.68).

Since then, the relationship between the EU and Israel has not radically changed. As of 2024, Israel imported 34.2% of its goods from the EU and exported 28.8% of its goods to the EU (*EU trade relations with Israel*, n.d.). On this note, I want to make an observation that became evident throughout my research. While European institutions provide numerous sources regarding the humanitarian assistance they offer to the Palestinians, there is comparatively little information available about the concrete measures taken against Israel. On the contrary, the only information I was able to find relates to the sanctions approved in July 2024 in response to settler violence in the West Bank and the obstruction of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip (Council of the European Union, 2024). These sanctions were introduced in response to systemic human rights violations against Palestinians, including, but not limited to, the establishment of new settlements in the West Bank, the blocking and destruction of humanitarian aid destined for Gaza, and acts of physical and psychological violence, such as threats calling for the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians (Council of the European Union, 2024). The sanctions included asset freezes and a prohibition on providing funds or economic resources to those targeted – whether directly or indirectly (Council of the European Union, 2024). However, it is important to note that the sanctions only applied to a total of 5 individuals and 3 entities, none of which direct members of the Israeli government or military (Council of the European Union, 2024).

Chapter 5 – Doctrine in Action

In this section, I outline the research design and analytical approach I adopted for this thesis. I start with an overview of the methodology, followed by a description of the data type and sources, the analytical framework employed to interpret the findings, and a comprehensive analysis of the results.

5.1 Methodology

In order to investigate the ways in which the EU instrumentalizes religion to justify its foreign policy responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people, I adopted a critical, qualitative methodology. Grounded in postcolonial theory, normative empire Europe, and grievability theory, the research I conducted and analysis that ensued, are interpretative in nature. There are multiple reasons as to why I have decided to adopt a critical, qualitative approach rather than a positivist approach. On the one hand, my ultimate aim with this thesis is to understand how the EU instrumentalizes religion to justify its foreign policy responses and, subsequently, how it is able to maintain civilizational hierarchies. On the other hand, a positivist approach requires that the researcher maintains a certain degree of impartiality and objectivity throughout their research. Given the genocidal violence perpetrated against Ukraine and Palestine by Russia and Israel, respectively, I find a positivist approach inappropriate. To remain impartial or objective in the face of systemic death and destruction is to be complicit.

The primary methodological approach I employed is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Before I proceed with a general description of what CDA is and why I believe it to be the most appropriate method to address my research question, it is important to make a distinction between text and discourse. On the one hand, text is any written or spoken content that can be read or heard (Fairclough, 2003). On the other hand, discourse refers to the use of written, spoken, or signed language in a social context to convey a certain meaning (Fairclough, 2003). Given this, discourse analysis refers to the critical examination of written, spoken, or signed language to understand the implications it has within a social context. In other words, it analyses how discourse can shape knowledge and establish what is true. Building on the framework presented by Norman Fairclough (2003), discourses can be understood as ways of representing different dimensions of the world, including the material, mental, and emotional. More importantly, they are not neutral reflections of reality but manifestations of power

dynamics, whereby certain values, interests, and perspectives are given a central role over others and with tangible, social consequences (Fairclough, 2003).

Given its focus on uncovering how discourse constructs meaning and, subsequently, reinforces or challenges dominant ideologies and power dynamics, CDA is the most appropriate method for this thesis. With my focus on how the EU instrumentalizes religion in its discourse on external crises, CDA is particularly relevant as it allows me to examine how European political actors frame and, by extension, legitimize their responses to these events. Additionally, my focus on the EU's justification of its foreign policy responses to Russian and Israeli violence directly engages with questions of power, ideology, and social change, which, as it was previously mentioned, are central to CDA. Furthermore, my use of postcolonial theory, grievability theory, and the concept of normative empire Europe, render my methodological choice even more appropriate. With their focus on how hierarchies of value, power, morality, and grievability are constructed and maintained, CDA allows me to examine the subtle yet significant ways in which religion might be instrumentalized discursively to support or contest these hierarchies.

While coding can be a valuable tool in CDA, I chose not to use it for this thesis. Instead, I adopted an interpretative, context-driven approach, focusing on broader themes and patterns rather than specific codes within each text. This choice was guided by the theories I presented in the theoretical framework as well as the insights I gathered in the literature review. Given that EU discourse is often framed in legal and detached language, I was concerned that by reducing the texts to discrete codes, I might have risked overlooking the more implicit and secular ways in which religion might be instrumentalized. Therefore, I decided to adopt a more interpretative approach for it allowed me to perform a more nuanced reading of the texts and, by extension, capture the subtle and indirect ways in which religion might be instrumentalized within institutional discourse.

5.1 Data Selection

Before I delve deeper into the dataset, allow me to clarify the level of analysis I adopted for this thesis. Given the focus on foreign policy responses, a state-level analysis might seem appropriate. At the European level, foreign policy decisions such as the imposition of sanctions on third countries must be unanimously agreed on by all MS. However, by limiting my focus to the European Council I would inherently be restricting my analysis to the stance of MSs, thereby failing to capture the stance of the EU as a whole. Additionally, decisions made within

the European Council are typically practical in nature, meaning that the emotional aspect is limited or absent altogether. Furthermore, the European Council is not as vocal as other European institutions, in the sense that its representatives do not release speeches, press releases, and press statements with the same frequency as the other institutions. Consequently, while I maintain an institutional-level analysis, I focus on the other main European institutions – that is, the European Commission, the European Parliament, and High Representative of the European Union, from here onward referred to as the High Representative. In doing so, I am better able to encompass the breadth of the EU and, subsequently, provide a more appropriate analysis as to how the EU as a collective political entity instrumentalizes religion to justify its foreign policy responses. Additionally, I am also able to overcome accessibility limitations, as these institutions play a more vocal and prominent role in shaping the EU's discourse and, by extension, its stance on foreign affairs. Furthermore, by focusing on the High Representative, I am able to still partially account for the position of MSs. The High Representative is not only responsible for conducting the EU's foreign and security policy and representing the EU in these matters, but also for ensuring "the implementation of the decisions adopted by the European Council" and building "consensus between the EU member states" (Council of the European Union, 2025). Consequently, with this approach, the stance of the MSs is still indirectly considered.

Building on this, the time frames I chose to focus on range from 2022 to 2025 for the Russian invasion of Ukraine and from 2023 to 2025 for the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people. However, it is important to acknowledge that the violence perpetrated by Russia and Israel against Ukraine and Palestine extends far beyond these periods. Despite this, I chose to focus on these time frames for both practical and political reasons. On the one hand, the chosen time frames allow me to identify specific moments within each case and, subsequently, carry out a more thorough analysis of the EU's foreign policy discourse. Given the constrains of this thesis, limiting the scope in this way ensures that my analysis remains focused as well as feasible. On the other hand, the chosen time frames allow me to encompass moments of intensified violence that have profoundly disrupted the foundations of the international political system. Although the violence perpetrated by Russia and Israel did not begin with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the genocide of the Palestinian people in 2023, these events have significantly challenged norms of sovereignty, self-determination, and human rights. As Blinne Ni Ghrálaigh, adviser to South Africa's legal team in the ICJ case against Israel, stated, this is "the first genocide in history where its victims are broadcasting their own destruction in real

time" (Reuters, 2024). This statement underscores the urgency of analysing the EU's response to these crises, particularly as political actors that claim to uphold the previously mentioned principles act only when beneficial to them, fail to attribute responsibility, or ignore their own complicity in the violence being committed by Russia and Israel.

Delving into the data, I primarily focused on speeches, press releases, and public statements from the main European institutions, namely, the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the High Representative. The data comes predominantly from the official websites of the European institutions including the websites of the European Commission, the European Parliament, the European Union External Action, and the Multimedia Centre of the European Parliament. To reiterate what I previously mentioned, I decided to focus on the High Representative rather than the European Council or the Council of the European Union since foreign and security policy fall under their jurisdiction. Building on this, I decided to focus on content from the representatives of each institution: Ursula von der Leyen for the European Commission, Roberta Metsola for the European Parliament, and Josep Borrell Fontelles for the High Representative for events until the end of 2024. For events in 2025, I included statements from Kaja Kallas, who succeeded Borrell as High Representative following the end of his mandate in November 2024. In doing so, I was able to maintain wider time frames and, subsequently, capture a broader set of events and, by extension, expand my dataset, thereby allowing to provide a more comprehensive analysis of how the EU might instrumentalize religion to justify its foreign policy across the cases chosen. However, I recognize that this transition might introduce some potential challenges in terms of consistency. To account for this, I ensured to keep in mind how this leadership change might affect the stance of the EU in relation to Russia and Israel and, more importantly, how it might affect the instrumentalization of religion to justify its foreign policy responses. Despite this, the continuity of von der Leyen and Metsola allows to maintain a certain degree of consistency and, more importantly, to balance between the individual influence of institutional representatives and the overarching stance of the EU as a whole.

On this note, I want to raise an important point regarding the accessibility of the data. Throughout my research, it became clear that while European institutions have been particularly vocal about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the same cannot be said for the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people. For instance, finding speeches, press releases, and public statements on key events such as the Rafah Offensive carried out by the Israeli military on the 6th of May, 2024, or the international arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court

(ICC) against members of the Israeli government – including the current Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity – proved significantly difficult. Interestingly, a similar pattern emerged when searching for the EU's response to the international arrest warrant issued by the ICC against members of the Russian government – including Russian President Vladimir Putin, similarly accused – despite the EU's consistent support for the establishment of a special tribunal to ensure Russian accountability and secure reparations for Ukraine. This does not necessarily represent a limitation for my analysis, as silence is itself a valuable data point – and an especially important one within the framework of CDA, where the absence of language can be as telling as its presence. However, to ensure my dataset provides an accurate picture of the EU's foreign policy discourse and, by extension, my analysis remains comprehensive, I also decided to examine European Parliament plenary sessions, specifically focusing on interventions by von der Leyen, Metsola, Borrell, and Kallas.

5.3 Findings and Analysis

In the following subsections, I outline the main discernible patters in the cases of Russia and Ukraine as well as Israel and Palestine. As I do so, I analyse them through a postcolonial lens – alongside normative empire Europe – and a grievability perspective. Before I delve any deeper, I want to point out to the fact that the case studies I deal with in this thesis are not just that. They are not simply case studies; they are the lives of millions of people. Given this, my aim is not only to discern the underlying mechanisms through which the EU justifies its foreign policy responses – in this thesis, through religion – but I also approach both cases with the utmost respect, aware that the lives of many have been lost and of many others are at risk as I write this.

5.3.1 Russia, Ukraine, and the European Union

When it comes to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the main discernible pattern in the EU's foreign policy response is a clear demarcation between Ukraine as part of an internal Self and Russia as an external Other, using primarily secular discourse. What is interesting to note is that this demarcation does not always rely on explicit references to Russia – or to how Russia is different from the EU. Rather, it occurs by explicitly framing Ukraine as part of a European civilization. This is made evident when European leaders claim:

> "Once again in the centre of Europe, innocent women, men, and children are dying or fear for their lives" (von der Leyen, 2022).

Although this is a seemingly geographical reference – indeed, Ukraine is geographically in Europe – one might argue that the use of language such as "centre of Europe" goes beyond mere geography and aims to create a more emotional and personal connection between the EU and Ukraine. This becomes even more evident when European leaders state:

> "This war is not just one against Ukraine, but one against the value-based system we have worked so hard to establish" (Metsola, 2022).

Through such statements, European leaders frame the Russian attack on Ukraine as an attack on European values. In doing so, they implicitly portray Ukraine as part of a European civilization, since framing the attack as an assault on European values inherently implies that Ukraine embodies these values. Building on this, the demarcation between Ukraine as part of an internal Self and Russia as an external Other also occurs using implicit language. This is particularly clear when European leaders claim:

> "The European Union, together with transatlantic and like-minded partners, have made unprecedented efforts to achieve a diplomatic solution to the security crisis caused by Russia, but Russia has not reciprocated" (Borrell, 2022).

By describing their partners as "like-minded", European leaders implicitly delineate between actors who share common norms, ideals, and diplomatic approaches, and those who do not. While they do not explicitly frame Russia as the external Other, the statement "Russia has not reciprocated", tacitly portrays Russia as fundamentally different from the EU and its partners, since it does not share similar values, visions, and diplomatic approaches. However, it is important to note that this civilizational demarcation – between Ukraine as part of a European Self and Russia as the external Other – is not achieved solely by portraying Ukraine as being the embodiment of European values and Russia as being fundamentally different from them. Rather, it is also constructed by portraying a Ukrainian victory as inherently a European victory and, more importantly, as essential to the defence of European interests rather than values. This becomes particularly evident when European leaders state: "Your freedom is our freedom" (von der Leyen, 2024b), or "It will be a Russian victory, which would pose a terrible threat to our security" (Borrell, 2023). Here, it is crucial to pay attention to the subject each leader centres in their framing. While von der Leyen presents support for Ukraine as essential to defending norms such as freedom, Borrell underscores the threat the Russian invasion constitutes to European security, implicitly suggesting that support for Ukraine is significant insofar as it is necessary to defend the EU itself. However, while one focuses on values and the

other on interests, both statements rely on the same discursive mechanism. By connecting Ukrainian freedom to European freedom, European leaders inherently frame the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an issue pertaining to the EU, thereby situating Ukraine within a European civilization. This, one might argue, can serve to legitimize action against Russia. While it becomes clear that support for Ukraine is not a matter of pure EU benevolence – but rather a way to defend its own strategic and geopolitical interests – it is interesting to note how European leaders portray Russia as an imperial action, such as by claiming:

> "President Putin is trying to turn back the clock to the times of the Russian empire" (von der Leyen, 2022), or "And one year on, Putin's imperial fantasies have woken up to a bleak reality" (von der Leyen, 2023a).

Building on this, another discernible pattern is how measures against Russia are framed in line with European norms, particularly that of peace. What I mean by this is that action against Russia is typically portrayed as necessary to defend European values and, subsequently, as legitimate. This becomes clear when European leaders state: "To win the peace, one must first win the war" (Borrell, 2023), or "This is why we have imposed tough sanctions on Russia" (Metsola, 2024b). Importantly, these statements reveal how European leaders instrumentalize a seemingly secular language – such as by invoking the norm of peace – to justify their foreign policy response against Russia as legitimate, since it is essential to defend these values.

A final discernible pattern refers to the way in which Ukrainian suffering is made visible. This is done primarily through the use of secular language that portrays the lives of Ukrainians as grievable and, by extension, as worthy of care. This becomes evident when European leaders claim: "It is costing many lives with unknown consequences ahead of us" (Borrell, 2022), or "It has shattered the lives of millions of Ukrainian people" (Metsola, 2023c), or "Today is a day of mourning" (von der Leyen, 2024b). Through the use of language such as "costing", "shattered", or "mourning", they inherently frame these lives as grievable and, consequently, worthy of protection. This is because such language – especially words such as "mourning" – frames death as a loss and, by extension, recognizes the life lost as valuable and therefore grievable. Indeed, if the life lost was not seen as valuable, it would not be understood as a loss, and thus it would not be mourned. Importantly, by explicitly referring to these lives as "Ukrainian people", European leaders give them a name and, by extension, an identity, thereby making their loss feel less distant. In doing so, one might argue that the suffering of Ukrainians is not perceived as something abstract or far removed, but as something that affects every

European – especially if one considers the portrayal of Ukraine, and thus Ukrainians, as part of a European civilization. As a result, action against Russia can be legitimized on the premise that it is necessary to ensure the survival of Ukrainians.

5.3.2 Israel, Palestine, and the European Union

With regard to the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people, what becomes evident is the overt instrumentalization of religion – not only to demarcate between civilizations, but also to make suffering both visible and invisible. Starting from the Hamas attacks on October 7th, 2023, European leaders frame them – and, subsequently, Israeli suffering – in explicitly religious terms, such as by stating that:

> "Hamas terrorists slaughtered over 1400 men, women, children, and babies in one day for one single reason. Because they were Jews just living in the State of Israel" (*Sitting of 18-10-*2023, 2023), or "The world has witnessed Jews being murdered simply because they were Jewish" (Metsola, 2023b).

Although these claims alone may not be strong enough for the EU to justify its foreign policy response, it is important to note that they are consistently accompanied by direct references to the Holocaust – also referred to as the Shoah. This is crucial to consider, as it enables the creation of a direct connection between the attacks and Europe, given that Jews were persecuted in Europe by Europeans. Such a thing becomes evident when European leaders claim:

> "This is the most heinous assault against Jews since the Holocaust" (von der Leyen, 2023b), or that "They took elderly Holocaust survivors and dragged them out of their homes" (Metsola, 2023b),

Given this, one might argue that they are able to establish a more personal connection between Israel and Europe, thereby implicitly framing it as the responsibility of the EU to support Israel, and subsequently, remain silent in the face of incremental violence against Palestinians. It then comes as no surprise that European leaders state:

> "Of course, Israel has a right to defend itself" (*Sitting of 18-10-2023*, 2023), or "Israel can count on the European Union's full support on this" (Kallas, 2025).

Building on this, European leaders also repeatedly refer to rising waves of antisemitism across Europe, as in von der Leyen's claim that "Hate chants against Jews suddenly resonated in Europe's streets" (2024a). In combination with references to the Shoah, these denunciations of

antisemitism allow European leaders to further frame the Hamas attacks against Israel as a European issue – one that demands a European response. Within this framework, they once again make numerous references to Judaism, yet they do so as a way to portray Isreal as culturally and historically aligned with Europe rather than to make Israeli suffering further visible. This becomes evident in statements such as "Jewish values have shaped our common European values" (*Sitting of 18-10-2023*, 2023) and "The story of Europe is the story of European Jews" (von der Leyen, 2024a). These claims contribute to the portrayal of Israel as similar to Europe, founded on the logic that if Judaism has significantly influenced European values, and Israel is predominantly Jewish, then the values upheld by the EU and Israel are intrinsically aligned.

While European leaders frame Israel as part of a European civilization through religious references, they do not explicitly construct Palestinians as the external Other – neither through religious discourse nor by portraying Palestine as fundamentally different from Europe. Rather, they frame Palestinians as external to a European civilization by essentially attributing the responsibility for the violence they endure solely to Hamas, while refraining from addressing the role of Israel in perpetuating violence against the Palestinian people. What this does is implicitly frame Palestinians as fundamentally different from a European civilization because of the presence of Hamas on the ground. Indeed, in several of the sources I have consulted, European leaders make statements such as: "Hamas terror has plunged Israel and Palestine into a new spiral of violence" (*Sitting of 18-10-2023*, 2023), or:

> "Humanitarian assistance needs to get into Gaza, and [it] can't at the moment because all ways in are closed" (*Sitting of 18-10-2023*, 2023).

While the latter statement does not mention Hamas explicitly, it also omits any reference to Israel. What happens then is that European leaders not only attribute responsibility solely to Hamas, but also repeatedly fail to acknowledge Israel's involvement in the systemic and large-scale destruction of Palestinians in Gaza, thus turning Israel into 'the one who shall not be named" (Hendl et al., 2024, p.172). As a result, this discursive strategy allows injustice and violence to persist and, more importantly for the purpose of this thesis, enables the EU to justify its inaction in holding Israel accountable for its war crimes and crimes against humanity – including genocide. While most of the sources I have consulted for this case study are from 2023, those from 2024 and 2025 similarly reveal that European leaders continue to refrain from explicitly condemning Israel's actions – despite the ICC arrest warrants – and instead continue

to refer to Judaism as a way to justify solidarity with Israel. This is most evident in the press remarks by Kallas (2025), where she once again reiterates support for Israel.

Before moving on the implications of these findings, I want to make a final observation. Although Palestinians are not explicitly framed as external to a European civilization, their suffering is made visible only to a limited extent – if at all. While Israeli suffering is rendered visible through direct religious references – such as antisemitism or the Shoah – Palestinian suffering is, at times, framed in legalistic, detached, and secular terms. For instance, in her statement marking the one-year anniversary since Hamas' attacks, Metsola (2024a) identifies the atrocities occurring in Gaza, yet fails to mention Palestinians altogether:

> "Too many young people now know the horror of war. Too many parents are forced to see their families go hungry. Too many children will never grow old".

What becomes evident from this is that the suffering described is attributed to someone, but by failing to name that someone, such suffering remains unrecognized. It is as if she were speaking of an abstract entity, far removed from one's lived reality. This is deeply problematic, because Palestinian lives are not framed as grievable and, by extension, are not recognized as worthy of protection. Consequently, this lack of recognition ultimately enables the EU to maintain its position in the face of the ongoing genocide. After all – and, as Butler (2016) argues – if one does not recognize the pain of another, then why care at all?

5.4 Discussion

Given this, it becomes clear that the findings – and their analysis – align with the theories used in this thesis. Starting from a postcolonial perspective, it is evident that religion can be instrumentalized to differentiate between civilizations and to make the suffering of some visible and of others invisible. This became evident in the case of Russia as well as Israel, yet it was done differently. While in the case of the former, it was done along secular lines, in the case of the latter it was done through religious as well as secular discourse. Building on the literary findings, this does not imply that in the instances where the EU did employ a secular vocabulary that religion was absent. Rather – and as Hurd (2008), Klimova (2020, p.628) and Lähdesmäki (2022, p.182) state – secularism not only does not imply the absence of religion but, more importantly, is inherently rooted in a Judeo-Christian tradition and has historically been attributed to Western societies. As a result, one might argue that the use of secular discourse in the portrayal of Russia as external to a European civilization and in the Othering

of Palestine and the suffering of Palestinians is inherently religiously infused. Consequently, while the EU might not directly instrumentalize religion in these instances, its presence can still be felt. More importantly, these findings reinforce the insights provided by postcolonial scholars such as Bhambra (2022) and Sen (2021).

By framing Russia and Palestine as the external Other and Ukraine and Israel as part of an internal Self, the EU ultimately creates a civilizational hierarchy. In doing so, it inherently legitimizes claims to sovereignty, self-determination, and self-defense in one case but delegitimizes them in another case. Specifically, claims to sovereignty made by Ukraine are seen as legitimate, while claims to self-determination made by Palestinians are not. The reason as to why this is the case, one might argue, is because while Ukraine is seen as part of a European civilization, Palestine is not, and thus concepts of sovereignty and self-determination do not apply. To reiterate the argument made by Bhambra (2022, p.5) and Sen (2021, p.49) in earlier sections, European countries must respect sovereignty and self-determination only when in relation to other European countries. In addition to this, they can decide which claims to sovereignty are seen as legitimate since their recognition is founded on an international system which gives European powers a central role. Therefore, it follows that the EU supports Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression but does not support Palestine's struggle against Israeli occupation. More importantly, it underscores how the EU can instrumentalize secular discourse – albeit, religiously infused – to justify its seemingly contradictory foreign policy responses.

What this confirms then is that the EU remains a postcolonial endeavor, with concrete and significant implications for how it positions itself globally. As it was seen in earlier sections, for the EU to be understood as a normative power, it must act in accordance with the values it claims are fundamental to itself, even when doing so might run counter to its strategic and geopolitical interests – especially then. However, as the cases of Russia and Israel show, this is not the case. While in one instance the EU was quick to provide support in the face of an illegal and illegitimate invasion, in another, it was quick to support the country responsible for the systemic and large-scale destruction of a people. What this underscores is not only a selective application of its norms, but also how it might instrumentalize religion to justify this discrepancy. Through the use of predominantly secular language in one case and explicitly religious references in the other, the EU was able to construct civilizational and, as I argue below, grievability hierarchies, allowing it to justify action in one case and inaction in the other.

Given this, it becomes clear that conceiving the EU as a normative power comes with numerous limitations and – to put it bluntly – might be wrongheaded altogether.

The limitations of conceiving the EU as a normative power become even more apparent when one considers the extent to which strategic and geopolitical interests shape its foreign policy responses. In line with Del Sarto's (2016) concept of normative empire Europe, and as I show in earlier sections, the EU not only applies its norms selectively, but does so in ways that align with its strategic objectives. More importantly, it becomes clear that the EU might instrumentalize religion in order to reconcile its normative identity with its geopolitical interests. As the case of Russia illustrates, European leaders frequently frame support for Ukraine not solely as a defense of European values, but also as necessary for the protection of the EU's strategic interests. This, one might argue, suggests that the EU's foreign policy responses are not purely driven by a genuine normative commitment, but rather by a need to defend its geopolitical position. Although this is done along predominantly secular lines in the case of Russia, it is important to reiterate that secularism is charged with religious connotations, since it is rooted in a Judeo-Christian tradition. A similar logic characterizes the EU's foreign policy response to the Israeli genocide. By portraying Israel as part of a European civilization, the EU is able to simultaneously justify its support and maintain its long-standing economic relations with the country – relations which, as seen in Chapter 4, continue despite the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people. Given this it becomes clear that the EU instrumentalizes religion to combine its normative identity with its strategic objectives, effectively becoming a normative empire.

As the findings and analysis underscore, the EU can construct civilizational hierarchies between an internal Self and an external Other, which, in turn, allow it to make the suffering of some visible and that of others invisible. This ultimately enables the EU to justify its foreign policy responses. By framing some as part of a European civilization through secular or explicitly religious language, the EU inherently renders the suffering of those who fall within this civilization visible. The reason this occurs is that, by portraying certain countries and peoples as part of the internal Self, their suffering is framed as a European issue – one that is not abstract, but personal to the EU. Consequently, this calls forth care from the EU to ensure that those perceived as part of a European civilization are being taken care of. What becomes evident from this is not only support for Butler's (2016) grievability theory, but also a vicious cycle between civilizational and grievability hierarchies. With the pain of only those belonging to the internal Self made visible, the suffering of marginalized people remains on the sidelines,

thereby reinforcing civilization hierarchies. In turn, this reinforces grievability hierarchies, where only the pain of those situated at the upper end of the civilization hierarchy is recognized.

While the findings and analysis underscore how the EU instrumentalizes religion in the cases of Russia and Ukraine, and of Israel and Palestine, several limitations highlight the need for further research. Firstly, I focus primarily on official discourse from the representatives of the European institutions. While this approach is beneficial as it allows me to narrow the scope of my research – especially considering the time and word constraints of this thesis – it is important to acknowledge that it inherently captures only part of the EU's foreign policy discourse, since such discourse might manifest differently within the institutions themselves. Given this, future research could expand its focus by considering intra-institutional discourse, including, plenary sessions of the European Parliament. This would allow researchers to capture discourse which might not always manifest in official institutional statements and, subsequently, discern further how religion might be instrumentalized to justify foreign policy responses.

Secondly, the data I use is rather limited, especially in the case of Israel and Palestine. As I previously mention, silence can be an important data point, particularly when using CDA. However, it is also true that when institutions are too silent, the interpretation of the data risks becoming overly speculative. In essence, while silence is useful for a thesis of this nature, it is equally important to have sufficient material to work with in order to meaningfully interpret that silence. Given this, broadening the focus to include intra-institutional discourse might once again prove beneficial. Beyond this, interviews with experts – such as at the European External Action Service (EEAS) – might also be valuable, as they could offer insights that do not appear in official institutional statements or in the discourse of members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Using data beyond discourse of institutional representatives could provide more context to the silence observed and, subsequently, allow for a founded interpretation of its meaning.

Lastly, one final limitation I have encountered refers to the timeframe. While limiting the timeframe to the ones I have chosen makes the scope of this thesis feasible, it also restricts the data available and, more importantly, inherently fails to capture the colonial history that continues to shape current power relations between the EU, Russia and Ukraine, and Israel and Palestine. Although I am aware that it is simply unfeasible to address this history within a thesis of this size, future research could focus on a timeframe beyond the ones considered here. In

doing so, researchers could better contextualize current discourses, ultimately strengthening the analytical and historical foundations of their findings. In line with this, I future research could focus on case studies beyond the ones examined in this thesis. The reason for this is because, as I demonstrate throughout this thesis, is that the instrumentalization of religion may manifest differently across contexts. As a result, other case studies may reveal insights that the ones explored here do not.

Chapter 6 – The Final Judgement

With this thesis, I answered the research question: *"How does the European Union instrumentalize religion to justify its foreign policy responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people?"*. In doing so, my aim was to demonstrate how the EU can instrumentalize religion to frame certain countries, peoples, and their suffering differently and, subsequently, justify action in some cases and inaction – or limited action – in other cases. Building on the literary insights on secularism and processes of Othering by far-right political parties and the EU as a whole, with this thesis I also aimed to fill a crucial gap in the literature on the intersection between religion, the EU, and European foreign policy. By using insights from the existing literature as well as postcolonial theory, normative empire Europe, and grievability theory, with this thesis I have shown that the EU instrumentalizes religion to ultimately frame some as part – or as similar to – an internal European self while simultaneously portraying others as external from it, thereby perpetuating colonial legacies and rendering the suffering of some visible and of others invisible.

In the case of Russia and Ukraine, this was done along seemingly secular lines. However, it is important to note that secularism is not impartial to religion and is rooted in a Judeo-Christian tradition. More importantly, it has historically been used to differentiate between Western societies, seen as superior, and non-Western societies, seen as inferior, thereby carrying an inherently civilizational and, by extension, colonial connotation. However, it is important to note, once again, that in portraying Ukraine as part of a European civilization, European leaders did not do so solely by referring to common values but also by portraying the advancement of European interests as contingent on support for Ukraine. What this shows is that support for Ukraine did not come solely from the benevolence of the EU, but also from a necessity to protect its strategic and geopolitical interests. Meanwhile, in the case of Israel and Palestine, this was done along overtly religious lines. While Israel was framed as part of a European civilization and Israeli suffering was made visible through explicit references to religion, Palestine was framed as the external Other and Palestinian suffering was made invisible – or only partially visible – by instrumentalizing a more secular, detached vocabulary or by omitting mentions to Palestine and Palestinians altogether.

Although European leaders outspokenly – and rightfully – condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people was frequently met with silence or a complete omission of Israel's role. While silence might not provide concrete evidence to

support one's argument, it underscores a discrepancy in the EU's treatment of countries and peoples, which inherently demonstrates how the EU is a post-colonial endeavour. Additionally, it accentuates a divergency in the EU's application of norms of peace, democracy, and human rights, which ultimately challenges its conceptualization as a normative power.

Given how religion can serve as a tool to differentiate between countries and peoples as well as to make suffering visible only in certain cases, further research on the intersection between religion, the EU, and European foreign policy, is not only academically important – such as to fill a research gap – but also societally relevant. As I stated at the start of this thesis, my critique is not directed at religion as a belief system but at its instrumentalization as a means to justify the construction of hierarchies of societies and grievability. As an institution which praises itself for its adherence to liberal democratic norms, it is the duty and responsibility of the EU to support these values not only when it is beneficial to itself – but especially when it is not. To claim to act as a normative power when failing to actively apply those norms across different cases, is to undermine one's own legitimacy. And if the EU wants to be understood as a normative power, it must act accordingly.

Bibliography – The Sacred Sources

Asad, T. (2003). *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity*. Stanford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804783095

Bhambra, G. K. (2022). A Decolonial Project for Europe. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *60*(2), 229–244. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13310

Bottici, C., & Challand, B. (2013). From Hammer and Sickle to Crescent: Religion and European Identity. In *Imagining Europe* (pp. 145–166). https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139059015.009

Bouris, D., & Fernández-Molina, I. (2024). The International Norm–Practice Relationship, Contested States, and the EU's Territorial (Un)Differentiation toward Palestine and Western Sahara. *Global Studies Quarterly*, *4*(2). https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae041

Butler, J. (2016). *Frames of war: when is life grievable?* Verso.

Del Sarto, R. A. (2016). Normative Empire Europe: The European Union, its Borderlands, and the "Arab Spring." *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *54*(2), 215–232. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12282

Diez, T. (2005). Constructing the Self and Changing Others: Reconsidering Normative Power Europe. *Millennium*, *33*(3), 613–636. https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298050330031701

EU trade relations with Israel. (n.d.). Retrieved 1 June 2025, from https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/israel_en

European Commission. Directorate General for Communication. (2025). *EU solidarity with Ukraine.* Publications Office. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2775/3300175

Council of the European Union. (2024). Extremist Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, as well as violent activists blocking humanitarian aid to Gaza: Five individuals and three entities sanctioned under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime (Press release No. 614/24). Consilium – Council of the European Union. Retrieved April 5, 2025, from https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/07/15/extremist-israeli-settlers-in-the-occupied-west-bank-and-east-jerusalem-as-well-as-violent-activists-blocking-humanitarian-aid-to-gaza-five-individuals-and-three-entities-sanctioned-under-the-eu-global-human-rights-sanctions-regime/

Council of the European Union. (2025). EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Consilium – Council of the European Union. Retrieved May 25, 2025, from https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/high-representative-foreign-affairs-security-policy/#role

Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: textual analysis for social research*. Routledge.

Foret, F. (2015). Religion and Politics in the European Union: The Secular Canopy. In *Religion and Politics in the European Union* (pp. v–v).

Gaza: World Court Orders Israel to Prevent Genocide | Human Rights Watch. (2024, January 26). https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/26/gaza-world-court-orders-israel-prevent-genocide

Haukkala, H. (2015). From Cooperative to Contested Europe? The Conflict in Ukraine as a Culmination of a Long-Term Crisis in EU-Russia Relations. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, *23*(1), 25–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2014.1001822

Hendl, T., Burlyuk, O., O'Sullivan, M., & Arystanbek, A. (2024). (En)Countering epistemic imperialism: A critique of "Westsplaining" and coloniality in dominant debates on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *Contemporary Security Policy*, *45*(2), 171–209. https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2288468

Hurd, E. S. (2008). *The politics of secularism in international relations* (Course Book). Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400828012

Israel's Crime of Extermination, Acts of Genocide in Gaza | Human Rights Watch. (2024, December 19). https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/12/19/israels-crime-extermination-acts-genocide-gaza

King, E., & EBSCOhost. (2016). *The pro-Israel lobby in Europe: the politics of religion and Christian Zionism in the European Union*. I.B. Tauris.

Klimova, G. S. (2020). European Identity between Religiousness and Secularity. *RUDN Journal of Political Science*, *22*(4), 617–633. https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-1438-2020-22-4-617-633

Kratochvíl, P. (2019). Religion as a Weapon: Invoking Religion in Secularized Societies. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, *17*(1), 78–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2019.1570760

Lähdesmäki, T. (2022). The role of Christianity in the European Union's heritage and history initiatives. *Journal of European Studies*, *52*(3–4), 170–186. https://doi.org/10.1177/00472441221115571

Manners, I. (2002). Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms? *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *40*(2), 235–258. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353

Nelsen, B. F., & Guth, J. L. (2016). Religion and the Creation of European Identity: The Message of the Flags. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, *14*(1), 80–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2016.1145476

Nitoiu, C. (2017). Still entrenched in the conflict/cooperation dichotomy? EU-Russia relations and the Ukraine crisis. *European Politics and Society (Abingdon, England)*, *18*(2), 148–165. https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2016.1197875

Nullpunkt. (2025, May 18). *UN Rapporteur Francesca Albanese on Germany's role in Gaza genocide – and repression of dissent* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGR74upAjoA

Palestine—European Commission*. (2025a). https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/countries-region/palestine_en

Palestine—European Commission*. (2025b). https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/middle-east-and-northern-africa/palestine_en

Peker, E. (2022). Finding Religion: Immigration and the Populist (Re)Discovery of Christian Heritage in Western and Northern Europe. *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)*, *13*(2), 158-. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020158

Purohit, K. (2023). *Does Israel have the right to self-defence in Gaza?* Al Jazeera. Retrieved 3 June 2025, from https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/17/does-israel-have-the-right-to-self-defence-in-gaza

Sen, S. (2021). A postcolonial critique of Eu–Middle East relations. Routledge Handbook of EU–Middle East Relations, 47–56. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429317873-6

Siddi, M., Hoerber, T., Valdemarin, S., & Bohas, A. (2024). EU-Russia Relations and the Ukraine Conflict. In *The EU in a Globalized World* (1st ed., Vol. 1, pp. 11–26). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003326083-2

Smeets, K. (2024). Religious Contra-Identities Within the Political Rhetoric of the European Far Right. In *When Politics Meets Religion*. Taylor & Francis Group. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003422976-3

Solidarity with Ukraine. (n.d.). Retrieved 3 April 2025, from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/fs_24_6565

Staff, A. J. (2022). *'No other option': Excerpts of Putin's speech declaring war*. Al Jazeera. Retrieved 29 May 2025, from https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/24/putins-speech-declaring-war-on-ukraine-translated-excerpts

Wolkenstein, F. (2023). Christian Europe Redux. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *61*(3), 636–652. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13400

'You Feel Like You Are Subhuman': Israel's Genocide Against Palestinians in Gaza. (n.d.). Retrieved 3 June 2025, from https://www.amnesty.org.uk/genocide-report-uk-2024

Appendix – Additional Revelations

Borrell, J. (2022). *Russia's aggression against Ukraine: Press statement by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell.* European External Action Service. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/russias-aggression-against-ukraine-press-statement-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell_en

Borrell, J. (2023). *EP Plenary: Speech by High Representative Josep Borrell on one year of Russia's invasion and war of aggression against Ukraine.* European External Action Service. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/ep-plenary-speech-high-representative-josep-borrell-one-year-russia%E2%80%99s-invasion-and-war_en

Borrell, J. (2024a). *One year after the 7 October terrorist attacks by Hamas: Closing statements by Josep BORRELL FONTELLES, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission*. European Parliament. Retrieved April 22, 2025, from https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/video/one-year-after-the-7-october-terrorist-attacks-by-hamas-closing-statements-by-josep-borrell-fontelles-high-representative-of-the-eu-for-foreign-affairs-and-security-policy-and-vice-president-of-the-european-commission_I261687

Borrell, J. (2024b). *HR/VP Josep Borrell video message on continuing European support for Ukraine after 1000 days of war* [Video]. European External Action Service. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBZ4d8cmr-o&ab_channel=EuropeanExternalActionService%28EEAS%29

Metsola, R. (2022). *Aggression is confrontation with Europe: Speech of President Metsola on Ukraine*. European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220224IPR24012/aggression-is-confrontation-with-europe-speech-of-president-metsola-on-ukraine

Metsola, R. (2023a). *President Metsola at the European Council: EU must remain coherent and united*. European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20231017IPR07503/president-metsola-at-the-european-council-eu-must-remain-coherent-and-united

Metsola, R. (2023b). *President Metsola in solidarity with the victims of the terror attacks in Israel*. European Parliament. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20231011IPR06911/president-metsola-in-solidarity-with-the-victims-of-the-terror-attacks-in-israel

Metsola, R. (2023c). *One year of Russian Aggression against Ukraine: Statement by Roberta METSOLA, EP President*. European Parliament. Retrieved April 21, 2025, from https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/video/one-year-of-russian-aggression-against-ukraine-statement-by-roberta-metsola-ep-president_I237109

Metsola, R. (2024a). *Statement by Roberta METSOLA, EP President, on one-year anniversary of terrorist attacks in Israel, followed by one minute of silence*. European

Parliament. Retrieved April 22, 2025, from https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/video/statement-by-roberta-metsola-ep-president-on-one-year-anniversary-of-terrorist-attacks-in-israel-followed-by-one-minute-of-silence_I261496

Metsola, R. (2024b). *1000 days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine - Extraordinary Plenary Sitting: Statement by Roberta METSOLA, EP President*. European Parliament. Retrieved April 22, 2025, from https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/video/1000-days-of-russia-s-invasion-of-ukraine-extraordinary-plenary-sitting-statement-by-roberta-metsola-ep-president_I263737

Kallas, K. (2025). *Israel: Press remarks by High Representative Kaja Kallas after the EU-Israel Association Council*. European External Action Service. Retrieved May 18, 2025, from https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/israel-press-remarks-high-representative-kaja-kallas-after-eu-israel-association-council_en

Sitting of 18-10-2023 | Plenary | European Parliament. (2023, October 18). https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/vod.html?mode=chapter&vodLanguage=EN&playerStartTime=20231018-08:33:07&playerEndTime=20231018-11:17:18#

von der Leyen, U. (2022). *Press statement by the President on Russia's aggression against Ukraine*. European Commission. Retrieved April 21, 2025, from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_22_1322

von der Leyen, U. (2023a). *Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on one year of Russia's invasion and war of aggression against Ukraine*. European Commission. Retrieved April 20, 2025, from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/%20en/speech_23_844

von der Leyen, U. (2023b). *Statement by President von der Leyen with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu*. European Commission. Retrieved May 18, 2025, from https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/statement-president-von-der-leyen-israeli-prime-minister-netanyahu-2023-10-14_en

von der Leyen, U. (2024a). *Speech by President von der Leyen at the memorial ceremony commemorating the one-year anniversary of the 7 October acts of terror*. European Commission. Retrieved April 22, 2025, from https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/speech-president-von-der-leyen-memorial-ceremony-commemorating-one-year-anniversary-7-october-acts-2024-10-07_en

von der Leyen, U. (2024b). *Statement by President von der Leyen on 1,000 Days of Ukrainian Resilience, via video message*. European Commission. Retrieved April 21, 2025, from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_24_5930

Declaration of Authorship

I, Chiara Fachin, declare that this thesis has been written by me and me alone, **no part** of it has been written by AI or someone else, unless in the form of a quote. The AI tool Grammarly has been used to ensure that the grammar was correct, but it has **not** been used for copying, editing, or writing of the text. A friend has been contacted to translate part of the text from the Acknowledgements section from English to Ukrainian, with the original version in English being written by me.