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978-1-107-08271-7 - Religion and Politics in the European Union: The Secular Canopy

François Foret

Excerpt

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## Introduction

Religion has dramatically reemerged within European politics, a state of affairs at odds with narratives of an irresistible secularizing process. Despite this, Europe has not realigned itself with the rest of the world, characterized as it is by the continuing high salience of religion in public affairs. Rather, this renewed visibility of religion within Europe can be seen as the manifestation of the major endogenous social, cultural, and political reconfigurations taking place on the old Continent. These ongoing transformations are all the more remarkable for having become intertwined with the strongly functionalist and secular mechanisms of European integration. The purpose of this book is to understand the meanings of these processes and their interactions.

The social sciences have long documented the unavoidable encounter between politics and religion, two fundamentally charismatic domains where individuals may be called upon to sacrifice their lives, or where at the very least the individual enacts his or her core identity and values. It would thus be a source of wonder if there were no relationship between temporal and spiritual powers. This does not exclude secularization, as engaging with religion may involve an acknowledgment of its decline or an active struggle against it. Religion and politics are interrelated and are bound to impact each other, but this may occur in a variety of ways. Today, there is a striking contrast between the commonplace view that European governance does not concern itself with the anthropological questions that have marked power throughout human history, such as identity and the sacred, and the furious controversies that religious topics are able to generate. A double normalization of politics and religion is thus occurring in Europe, suggesting that this reestablishment of the links between the two terms marks a return to business as usual. This is not simply a repetition of the situation prevailing in the past: both variables have evolved quite considerably over time. Put simply, the developing European political order can only be understood if gods fit somewhere into the picture,

and religious beliefs and institutions cannot avoid coming to terms with the new political context. To understand this more fully, we should perhaps offer some clarifications regarding the scope, theoretical postulates, sources, and method underpinning the analysis set out here.

In what follows, our reflection is chronologically and spatially limited to contemporary Europe. There is a specific focus on the European Union (EU) as a space of intensified political and cultural interactions and as the epitome of political transformation achieved by means of its political and institutional apparatus. However, the EU does not strictly subsume religion as a social and cultural reality. Exchanges with near neighbors (Turkey and South Mediterranean countries) or with other parts of the world (especially the United States), together with migratory as well as ideational or symbolic flows, all help to define European religion. The EU is not a hermetic container of European religious politics.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, our chronological scope is limited to the short history of European integration or to recent years, with the debate about the Christian heritage as the symbolic cornerstone of Europe gaining momentum at the turn of the past century. Naturally, this narrowing of focus does not mean we can ignore the crucial importance of the long term, the *longue durée*, in structuring the ongoing rearticulation between religion and politics.

Our ambition here is to address the various ways the unification of Europe runs up against religion. Although our analysis does not pretend to be exhaustive, the challenge is considerable, as more interfaces are opening up. Up to now, the boom in scholarship on these issues has cast light on the ways representation of religious interests has been institutionalized, on the doctrinal and party-political history of Christian Democracy and its influence on the paths taken by European integration, on the indirect impact of European law and public policy on religion, and, more marginally, on the elective affinities of religious values with certain types of behavior (postmaterialism and support for European construction). Relatively little has been written on the precise role of religion in European politics *stricto sensu*, apart from the testimonies of actors or normative statements by philosophers. The aim here is to follow the traces left by religion in the formation of the identity and priorities of European elites, in acting as an incentive for political choices by decision makers, and in providing raw material for coalition-building strategies, party positioning, or electoral communication.

The underlying postulate is that a polity is best known and understood through its elites. Political change is not always top down and a book highlighting the importance of cultural factors is bound to stress the fact that societal

<sup>1</sup> We tend to refer to the EU when this political organization is the unit of analysis, the political actor, or the territorial perimeter in question. We speak of Europe in a more general sense when the analysis is more accurately circumscribed by the Continent as a geopolitical area not totally congruent with the institutional and legal patterns centered on Brussels and Strasbourg. The Council of Europe is not to be forgotten and is mentioned when it is relevant.

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trends and systemic developments are at least as influential as leadership and institutional engineering. Nevertheless, anything important that happens in politics finds its translation at the summits of the political community. Even a pattern of governance defined as without centers or with multiple centers will be dramatized by a withdrawal of the elites in on themselves. European political actors are a motley crew. This conglomeration of actors is not necessarily representative of the European population as a whole. In particular, different levels of religiosity are evident between rulers and ruled: religion may be used purely instrumentally by politicians trying to appeal to the beliefs of their followers; and there are yawning gaps between the institutional role of religion in high politics and its shrinking presence in the day-to-day societal life of individuals. If we acknowledge this mismatch (and thus the unrepresentative nature of European elites), religion can provide an indicator of how well European integration fits with and impacts the cultural, normative, and identity choices made by Europeans. The salience of religion in the United States is frequently presented in terms of its place within presidential or congressional politics because political and institutional forms are merely intensified patterns of societal dynamics. Religion in Washington is not religion in Massachusetts or Texas, any more than religion in Brussels is the same as it is in the backwoods of European societies. The gap between the two tells us something about supranational and transnational politics. This book describes the multiple involvements of religion in the selection of European elites (the role of religiously inspired political families in the framing of Europe and the recruitment of politicians to European offices). We address the presence of religion in the competition for power and influence through the various democratic channels (elections, representation of interests, expertise, deliberation, and communication); in deciding the orientation of public policy, especially where value choices are involved; in the legitimization of the whole European polity; and in relationships with the rest of the world. One of our aims is to go beyond religion seen as the consensual object of peaceful ecumenical dialogue and as contributing to good governance, in order to stress how religion can be part and parcel of internal political conflict. Conversely, in external politics, religion may be presented as a source of antagonisms in a so-called clash of civilizations, but may also provide a reservoir of references and intermediaries for building bridges and securing cooperation, or simply exist as a symbolic code for the marking of boundaries.

A further clarification is required to explain why the analysis centers to some extent on Christianity, deemphasizing but not ignoring Islam, which in mainstream literature usually becomes the central issue as soon as religion and politics are seen to be related. The reasons for this are both empirical and conceptual. From an empirical standpoint, any focus on the political effects of religion at the supranational, elite level has to acknowledge the fact that Islam is not established as a major player in the European arena and is still struggling to find representative elites who will voice its interests. From a conceptual

standpoint, Islam may be one cause of the renewed prominence of religion because of a revival of other religious heritages in reaction to it. But all denominations follow the same secularizing trajectories at different levels and with different intensities. There is no Muslim specificity worth isolating as a single variable, and Islam has to be understood in the general framework of a new accommodation between politics and religion in Europe. This is why Islam appears in several places in the analysis as a reinforcing but nevertheless secondary and not particularly specific entity.

One final clarification about the theoretical scope of this book concerns the extent and limits of the vast debate on secularization. The fundamental hypothesis here is very clearly that Europe is in the process of secularizing and is experiencing a societal decline in religion accompanied by a profound transformation of its nature. The religious reference has lost much of its social relevance and has increasingly become marked by culture. Religion is not about to disappear from Europe but remains in the form of a strong historical trace, a significant symbolic marker, and a weak normative resource that can be enlisted for all kinds of purposes. It has, however, ceased to be an authoritative matrix capable on its own of framing political behaviors and issues. As such, its presence is often felt in key debates on contemporary governance: the location of boundaries, the choice between soft power or hard power, the decline or reawakening of Europe as a civilization, confrontation with other civilizations and powers, regulation of cultural diversity, as well as public decision making in matters where there is uncertainty over intended outcomes, the limits of expertise, and rationality itself.

In what follows, the main argument of this book defines religion<sup>2</sup> as a symbolic resource that is no longer capable of structuring a collective identity, and is thus unlikely to provide cement for the building of a European polity. But religion can set apart, mark the boundaries between “us” and “them,” and flag up internal divides in a given community. Religion has little influence in the selection of European rulers but does feature in expressions of loyalty to political heritages and in distinctions between competitors. Religion does indeed play a role in public policy, notably by asking questions framed in terms of

<sup>2</sup> Definition is understood as a sum of abstract representations, behaviors, structures, and actors invested with a normative, symbolic, and/or emotional charge. This understanding is very similar to the classic definition offered by Bruce and Wallis: “Religion for us consists of actions, beliefs and institutions predicated upon the assumption of the existence either of supernatural entities with powers of agency, or impersonal powers possessed of moral purpose, which have the capacity to set the conditions of, or to intervene in, human affairs. Further, the central claims to the operation of such entities or impersonal powers are either not susceptible to, or are systematically protected from, refutation” (Bruce S and Wallis R, ‘Secularization: The Orthodox Model’ in S Bruce (ed.), *Religion and Modernization. Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992) 10–11. A key element is the ability of religion to produce effects in social life. This invites us to focus on the uses and status of religion rather than on its content per se.

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fundamental rights and of recognition of minorities. Besides, religion retains a significant and potentially explosive power as a communicational raw material within the media and cultural landscape. In geopolitical matters, religion may open up channels between the EU and the rest of the world and offer references that draw on memory to justify solidarities or diplomatic postures. It is not, however, obvious that religion matters enough to create divides stronger than interests dictate. In short, the picture drawn of religion in European politics suggests that Europe is following the path of a European modernity rooted in the Enlightenment and is maximizing these characteristics. Even at its most combative, modernity has never succeeded in eradicating religion, and what is happening today is no more than a maximization of changes that have been at work for at least two centuries, a kind of hyper-modernity. Notions such as postsecularism, which suggest a radical bifurcation of the paths of political and religious modernity in European history, should be regarded with skepticism.

Another feature of this book is the recurrent comparison between Europe and the United States. To be more precise and modest, the claim is not to develop a comparison term to term and to produce fresh knowledge on the United States, but to rely on existing expertise on the American case to “test” Europe. The United States is both a model and a counterexample. It is a model because there is a huge literature on religion and American politics that offers methods of data collection and analysis, contrasting with the relative thinness of European scholarship. For some observers, it is also a model in the normative sense. The exceptionality of European secularization is contrasted with the resilience of American religiosity in order to emphasize that secularization does not necessarily go hand in hand with modernity. In some of the literature, the United States is celebrated as a mature democracy able to integrate religion within social life and political deliberation. The EU is invited to enter a postsecular era and to make room for believers in the public space and in the definition of collective preferences. At the same time, the United States is also a stimulating “Constitutive Other” for understanding the EU because of the similarities and differences between the two. Like the EU, it is an example of multi-level governance, a multicultural polity, and a mature democracy. The stronger social relevance of religion in the United States has the advantage of highlighting the ideas and processes at work with more clarity than the subdued spiritual phenomena that underlie politics in Europe. This is not to say that the EU, as a quasi-federation, should be equated with the American state. There are evidently numerous dissimilarities stemming from the nature and limits of the European political community and the extent of its competences as regards the regulation of spiritual affairs. However, this comparison leads toward a recognition of the EU as a full political system likely to produce effects in all policy sectors and to reframe identities and allegiances well beyond decision-making circles in Brussels.

As the arena where cultural diversity and conflicting interests or worldviews are expressed, the European Parliament (EP) is a privileged field in which to

observe the political effects of religion. The U.S. House of Representatives is the most comparable legislating body because of its mode of election and its size. Differences should, however, be kept constantly in mind. A congressman (the name commonly designates a member of the House, even if technically speaking a senator is also a member of Congress) represents about six hundred fifty thousand citizens but with great discrepancies between, for example, Alaska and California. He or she bears comparison with a member of the European Parliament (MEP) from a big member state who represents more than eight hundred seventy-five thousand people, with significant variations between countries.<sup>3</sup> The districts where the representatives are elected may lead them to be sensitive to local concerns.<sup>4</sup> The literature also suggests that there are regional factions, with these more prevalent among Republicans than Democrats. This factor leads to a territorial fragmentation of the party-based logic of representation but presumably one far weaker than the national subdivisions operating at the EP.

Analysis of religion at the House of Representatives highlights several variables that can be tested at the European Parliament. Religion does indeed matter in American politics, admittedly less strongly than partisanship and ideology, but still significantly. It gives purpose and incentives to political actors. It creates cleavages, but evolving cleavages. Religiously based positions shift according to contexts and circumstances. A single event may be sufficient to alter the salience and the form of religion as a political factor. Before September 11, 2001, President Bush's defining moment was his decision on stem cell research. After September 11, his bedrock issues were the war against terror and how to come to terms with Islam. Some cleavages organized around strongly discriminatory issues are likely to divide politicians in a lasting way. For example, "progressive" sexuality is bound to remain a contentious issue for some time, even if its intensity as an issue is declining.<sup>5</sup> To assess similarities and divergences between American and European configurations, the influence of social, political, and institutional contexts has to be clarified. The social context is the general background against which we have to understand representativeness, how a politician represents his or her electors, and the role that religion can play in this symbolic relationship. Social context tells us about the individual religiosity of political actors in their relation to the religious beliefs of the electorate; about the implications of belonging to a specific denomination; about the way politics may encompass religious and cultural diversities; and about the role of religion in the political socialization of a decision maker, inside the legislative body, in the capital, in his or her constituency, and in the national or international political spaces. Political and institutional contexts are constituted by

<sup>3</sup> O. Costa, F. Saint Martin, *Le Parlement européen* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> E. A. Oldmixon, *Uncompromising Positions: God, sex, and the U.S. House of Representatives* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

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opportunities and constraints offered by the general political system and the specific institution within which a politician operates, as well as by the general climate of opinion about religious or religiously related issues.

This book relies on various research methods as well as empirical data. MEPs were chosen as the most sizeable and representative category of European elites. A survey on “Religion at the European Parliament” (RelEP<sup>6</sup>), the first endeavor of its kind, was carried out between 2010 and 2013 by a consortium associating several national teams. One hundred sixty-six interviews with MEPs of various nationalities and political affiliations were carried out face to face or online. The RelEP survey provides the mainstay of our analyses, supplemented when required by other forms of research. The survey had three main lines of investigation. A first question considers how to identify religion as a political factor in parliamentary politics (for example, on the basis of denominational affiliation or of level of religiosity) and how to measure its effects (by analyzing voting patterns or other activities). A second question examines religion as a policy issue, one with a variable salience across policy sectors, and religion as material for “cultural politics,” a transversal political style that goes beyond the search for compromise to enforce nonnegotiable values. The purpose of this is to find out whether religion is business as usual in parliamentary politics or creates specific conflicts, cleavages, and strategies. A third and final question investigates the way the parliamentary institution is able to frame the religious preferences of politicians on the one hand, and religious issues on the other. The framing of individual preferences can be assessed by observing the effect of legislators’ longevity within the Parliament on how they handle religion. As regards religious issues, the socializing effect of the institution can be seen if the amount of time that a controversy involving moral choices related to religious beliefs has been active is shown to correlate with a kind of “agreeing how to disagree.” Either the need for compromise prevails in order to protect the functioning of the Parliament, and politicians develop ways to comply with this constraint while making symbolic uses of religion, or religion prevails as an absolute value.

Apart from interviews, use was made of complementary sources: an analysis of oral and written questions asked by MEPs; reports and other institutional documents offering evidence of the activities of the European Parliament related to religion; and party manifestos for European elections over a period of thirty years, consulted with the help of a preexisting database. Information was also gathered on other European elites (European commissioners, civil servants, and judges) by exploiting the – very limited – literature and resources in existence. Qualitative case studies were also carried out for key events that illustrated interactions between European politics, policies, and religion, such as the Buttiglione crisis or the cartoons crisis. A longitudinal study of controversies about religious topics in the media was undertaken in order to understand

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.releur.eu/index.html>, accessed August 12, 2014.

the role of religion in the potential framing of a European public space as well as the communicative uses of religion in reformulating national and other collective identities.

#### CHAPTER OUTLINES

In Chapter 1, religion is assessed as a parameter in the building of the EU as a political system and a political community. A survey of mainstream theories of European studies suggests that their silence about religious issues results from both the functionalist intellectual heritage of the discipline and the fact that European institutions were not originally endowed with the relevant competences. However, although European integration as a process offers limited opportunities to grapple with religion, things are significantly different when the EU is regarded as a polity in the full sense of the term. The “normalization” of the EU and comparisons with classic models of political domination reintroduce the anthropological question of the relationships between spiritual and temporal affairs. Three models are developed in particular, allowing different features to be highlighted. Seeing the EU as a consociation of states emphasizes not only that European policy making postulates secularization understood as a cooling of political and religious passions, but also that it freezes all identities. Seen as a federation, the EU provides a framework for the distribution of competences in matters of religion between territorial and functional levels. As a normative project, federalism also induces a global ethic of governance that has elective affinities with Christian ideals. Viewing the EU as an empire offers a pattern through which to discuss the role of religion in drawing external boundaries along civilizational lines and internal boundaries according to a greater or lesser congruence with the central, “core” culture.

Chapter 2 investigates the role of religion in the selection of European leaders. First, it discusses the commonly received idea that Christian Democracy has provided a reservoir of personnel and ideas in the building of European communities. While acknowledging the key role of this political family, it is also necessary to be aware of its internal divisions regarding supranational politics, its purely internal motivations, the decline of Christian Democracy as a leading force, and its relative absence in new member states, as well as the influence of competing ideological traditions on the path taken by European integration. Second, the chapter measures the effect that the personal religiosity of politicians has had on their accession to European offices. MEPs are the largest and most representative sample of European leaders. They appear as a secularized elite, and one notably more secularized than average Europeans. MEPs tend to agree on the basic principles of separation between political and religious affairs, even if there are significant national disparities in the way this separation is understood. A comparison with the high salience of religion in the selection of American representatives underlines the extent of European secularization. Religion plays a still more elusive part in the selection of other

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European elites. It is invisible in the recruitment of European judges, again in strong contrast with their American counterparts. There is also little evidence that religion interferes in the practices of European civil servants, although it may structure networks both inside and outside institutions, as well as providing a basis for coalition building.

Chapter 3 deepens the analysis of the influence of religion on the allocation of power by tracing its uses in the European electoral process. Before European elections, religion is not a major mobilizing issue during the actual electoral campaigns, as is shown by its discreet presence in party manifestos. However, religious references help to identify different ideological traditions and political families. Similarly, manifestations of religion in the preelectoral communication of political groups at the European Parliament serve to mark boundaries and to distinguish groups from their competitors. This identity function becomes all the stronger once the elections are over, when elected MEPs individually rely on symbolic issues with limited political effects to build profiles as defenders or opponents of religion. In short, religion appears as a resource for making distinctions, unable to constitute an autonomous basis for an entire political project but able to provide material for attempts to claim political and above all media recognition. Again, when it comes to the way religion is treated, national and party affiliations are of great importance.

Chapter 4 focuses on how religion may contribute to the socialization of political elites (mainly MEPs) in Brussels, by creating either divides or solidarities. Here, religion has to be considered first as a belief and/or as an identity and second as a social network. As a belief and/or an identity, its effects as regards primary affiliations are conservative, as it is positively correlated with party, national, and denominational loyalties. The other side of the coin is that religion can help to deepen divides between nationalities and political families. However, it does not of itself create a cleavage. There is no evidence of a divide between denominations. When it comes to religion as a social network, MEPs are more likely to interact with lobbies sharing the same religious heritage, or at least the same interest in religious affairs. However, religious lobbies are largely considered to be “lobbies as usual” in day-to-day European policy making as they do not emphasize their denominational particularities during their interactions with representatives. They keep a low normative profile and reformulate their discourse in the language of public reason in order to take full advantage of the deliberative opportunities offered by the EP and other European institutions. Pluralism is the iron rule of coalition building, although some minority political entrepreneurs may choose to display extreme positions in order to exist politically. Broadly speaking, the organizations constituting European religious civil society seem to comply with the rules of the Brussels game more often than they are able to change these rules in the name of their own specific beliefs. They have to adopt and conform to suitable discursive repertoires and organizational forms in order to be heard.

The hypothesis is thus that there is a general trend whereby European elites comply with the prerequisites of the EU as a community of norms in matters of religion. This hypothesis is both confirmed and qualified by the analysis of major crises created by religious or religiously loaded issues (the Buttiglione affair, the Haider affair, and the Hungarian affair). These conflicts illustrate both the way supranational elites hesitate to tackle value issues head on (although the EP is increasingly ready to do so), and the requirement that candidates for European offices follow a moderate line. It is, however, excessive to speak of antireligious discrimination: for the most part opposition to religious individuals is more about inter-institutional struggles than private beliefs, as was the case for the Buttiglione affair. It may happen that politicians assume a high-level profile rooted in religious values, but these are invariably national leaders and even then, they are exposed to peer pressure by their counterparts from other member states.

Chapter 5 shifts from tackling religion as an incentive for political action and a pattern of socialization, to religion as a policy issue. The EU has no direct competences in matters of religion and no religious or political actor, at either the national or supranational level, is willing to change the existing state of play. Nevertheless, religion as an object for public action surfaces regularly on the European agenda in various fields, from foreign affairs to social and cultural affairs. Looking at the broader picture, it is possible to speculate about fundamental changes in the ways public policies are inspired and framed. These trends have their origins in societal and value changes leading toward more cultural liberalism and new forms of democratic regulation. This can be exemplified by welfare. The hypothesis is that there has been a shift from an originally Catholic to a dominantly Protestant cultural influence with the slow emergence of a European welfare system. The EU is simply a catalyst and an amplifier of this process. Instruments of governance such as open methods of coordination, as well as the individualization and contractualization of public norms, are soft but effective ways of implementing a shift from one form of cultural dominance to another. Policies involving ethical choices are the most likely fields for the emergence of religious references and actors. The key question is whether religion conforms to the politicization of the European political game and the polarization of two sides along well-identified lines (conservative/progressive, left/right). Taking this further, one scenario might see a spreading of culture wars in line with developments in the United States, with a radicalization of conflicts over moral issues fueled by a marking out of antagonistic stances based on religious considerations. These stances would be irreducibly resistant to compromise. However, European secularization and the very limited political salience of religion make this kind of culture war rather unlikely in Europe. Despite this, religion can be used as a “scandalizing” factor to attract public attention. It is a good issue on which to take up symbolic postures and send reassuring messages. For example, when discussing European funding of research and medical regulation, strongly championing human dignity from