

Religion in the EU : How Many Divisions ?

Written by François Foret

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FRANÇOIS FORET, JUN 3 2010

Sociologists present Europe as “an exceptional case” to the extent that religious beliefs and practices have declined there more than in any other part of the world. It does not mean that religion is disappearing. On the contrary, it is becoming more visible in the political and public arenas, in new, individualised and pluralised forms that are less linked to traditional churches.

The EU has no direct competence in relation to religion, but it is nonetheless controversial in this regard. It is presented both as a “Christian club” and as a materialistic and disenchanting process based on economic interests and which ignores or harms the traditional communities. Religion is more and more on the European agenda due to new competencies and enlargements of the EU, migrations and international crises.

The decline and mutation of religion in Europe are often contrasted with the vibrant spirituality that exists in America. The US is offered up to the EU as a model of democracy that is able to give religion space in the public arena. American authors suggest that Europe should go beyond the idea of secularisation – in the sense that modernity is eradicating religion – to elaborate a post-secular model where citizens are allowed to live and express their faith in a pacified democracy.

Meanwhile, the underlying influence of religion (or the absence of religion) is pointed as the explanation of different collective preferences on both sides of the Atlantic in terms of international security, world order or cultural liberalism.

The evolution of religion is also evoked as a source of division between elites and masses. American elites would be more secularized and more keen to cosmopolitan and post-modern values than the average citizen. Alternatively, European upper classes and rulers would remain more in touch with religion than the rest of the population due to the traditional collusion between churches and powers on the old continent. Such an assumption supports the denunciation of the excessive power of religious lobbies in Brussels as a denial of democracy and the rejection of the EU as a backyard of the Vatican.

Finally, religion is also reputed to create long-standing gaps between nations in European politics because of the path dependence from historical national models of relationships between spiritual and temporal powers.

On these issues, political and even academic debates are frequently contradictory, framed by normative visions and rely on weak empirical bases. A collective research project aims at testing these hypotheses by focussing on the role of religion in an intercultural key political arena. “Religion at the European Parliament” (<http://www.releur.eu/index.html>) investigates the beliefs of the members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and what they do with these beliefs. This survey of the religious preferences of the MEPs is next to be compared with the place of religion in American politics and in the political life of the member states of the EU.

Questions cover individual beliefs and practices of representatives ; discourses and votes on key political issues related to religion; effects of trans-party structures organised on a religious/philosophical basis in order to assess the ability of religion to socialise politicians beyond political divides; and the place and influence of religious interest representation at the assembly.

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Associating partners of seven European universities, the research has been launched at the beginning of 2010 and is likely to be concluded at the end of 2011.

First very partial results suggest that religion at the European Parliament functions mainly on an individual basis, as a personal inspiration for the MEP rather than as a massive social reality or an efficient lobby. Religion is estimated to contribute to the cohesion of political groups, but to underline divergences between nationalities. Major differences appear between believers and non-believers rather than between denominations. MEPs declare to be in occasional contacts with religious interest groups, with a strong Catholic presence which qualifies the criterion of equality between churches. But the influence of these interest groups is considered to target sectoral issues and to be far from overwhelming. Without surprise, fundamental rights (freedom of speech, fight against discriminations), education and culture and international relations are key fields where religious issues and actors are the most salient.

Last point, religion is perceived as playing a different role at the European Parliament than in national arenas, but it is not sufficient to transform the vision of the MEPs on spiritual matters. In short, the EU has not the ability to re-socialize political actors and to alter significantly their preferences. It is congruent with our first – again very exploratory – empirical findings which suggest that religion at the supranational level may take new forms but largely mirrors and accentuate what is happening in the depths of European societies.

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*François Foret is associate professor of political science, director of political researches at the Institute of European studies and researcher at the CEVIPOL, Université Libre de Bruxelles (fforet@ulb.ac.be). He is interested in European politics, legitimization of the EU, symbolic dimensions of power and interactions between politics and religion. Among his recent publications are: (2008), *Légitimer l'Europe. Pouvoir et symbolique à l'ère de la gouvernance*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po ; with V. Riva, « Religion between nation and Europe. The French and Belgian “no” to the Christian heritage of Europe », *West European Politics*, July 2010 33/4; « Religion: a Solution or a problem for the Legitimization of the European Union? », *Religion, State and Society*, 37 (1/2), 2009. Many of his publications are available freely here*

About the author:

François Foret is Professor of Political Science at the Free University of Brussels (Université Libre de Bruxelles—ULB) and Jean Monnet Chair ('Social and Cultural Dimensions of European Integration', SocEUR) funded by the European Commission. He is also Director of Political Research at the Institute for European Studies—ULB and a researcher at the CEVIPOL. His research interests include: European integration: institutions, politics and policies; European identity and memory; symbolic politics; the role of culture in the legitimization of political orders; interaction between religion and politics. Among his recent publications are: *Religion and Politics in the European Union: The Secular Canopy* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); 'Religion and Fundamental Rights in European Politics: Convergences and Divisions at the European Parliament', *Human Rights Review*; and 'Religion at the European Parliament', *Religion, State & Society*.