National Religions: How to be Both Under God and Under the European Union?

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**This is an excerpt from *Nations under God: The Geopolitics of Faith in the Twenty-First Century*.
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When looking at the geopolitics of faith in international affairs, Europe appears as a specific spot on the map for several reasons. First, it is an island swept by waves of secularisation (understood as the decline and mutation rather as the disappearance of religion) in a world where gods still hold strong positions. Second, it is a bastion of institutional separation between spiritual and temporal matters in contrast to other regions where the two domains are intimately intertwined. Third, Europe has experienced the most advanced process of regional integration. The rise of the European Union (EU) as a full political system and a level of governance salient in almost all policy fields may question the historical national arrangements between churches and states, and more largely between the sacred and the political. Though they incorporate their religious heritages in collective identity, memory and ethics, European nations, in short, may be less 'under God' than they used to be, but they are more and more 'under Brussels'. The question is then to know to what extent religions remain national and/or are reworked by European institutions, public action and power games. This chapter browses several levels of analysis (the distribution of competences to regulate religious affairs; religion in European politics in interactions with other political belongings; religion and the legitimisation of the EU) with references to more in-depth scholarship on each point to go further. The conclusion is that European integration interacts with the contemporary evolution of religion but does not command it. The EU is rather a structure of opportunity to foster societal trends, sometimes to resist them, and frequently to reformulate traditional discourses mixing religious and political repertoires in tune with present times. To a certain extent the European context reinforces the national character of religions, first by comparisons with the different practices of other member states, which highlights national specificities, and second by its use as a symbolic resource to express the national Self within the supranational and transnational arenas.

Extent and Limits of the Europeanisation of Religion

Two opposite discourses collide regarding the place and influence of religion in European politics and how it is altered in return by European public action. On the one hand, 'Vatican Europe' would be dominated by Christian forces, mostly Catholic. European institutions would be besieged by religious lobbies, turning the EU into a 'Christian club'. On the other hand, the EU would be a soulless and materialistic political system giving no place to values and crushing traditional morality.

Both discourses have this in common, that they are frequently developed without much empirical grounding. European studies have been reluctant to deal with identity and cultural—not to say religious—matters since their beginning, as European integration was supposed to be all about interests and economic issues. Nevertheless, the extension of EU competencies and its painful 'democratic deficit' have brought more and more legitimacy issues onto the agenda. The failed attempt to give a constitution to the EU fuelled the debate on the nature and limits of the European political community and what constitutes 'Europeanness'. Religion has been part and parcel of this search for roots and substance.

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Interactions between the EU and religions should be conceived in the broader setting of political and spiritual changes at work at all territorial and functional levels, from the local to the global. According to the treaties, the EU has no specific competences regarding the regulation of faith. It 'respects and does not prejudice the status under national law' of churches, religious associations or communities (as well as philosophical and non-confessional organisations) in the member states. The implementation of the principle of subsidiarity means that every country remains its own master at home. The European Court of Human Rights has confirmed this national rule on religious matters by recognising the 'margin of appreciation' left to states within the implementation of the core principles at the heart of European integration (through both the EU and the Council of Europe).

In European arenas, religious actors and references must submit to pluralism and relativism. To be heard, it is necessary to use the repertoire of fundamental rights and to enter into coalitions with other religious and non-religious actors. In other words, religion has to play by the rules of European multi-level governance and participatory democracy. It is not very different from what happens in member states, simply with more diversity and more pluralism. The more influential denominations at the national level are also the big players at the supranational level.

Religious and National Belongings: In Congruence, Tension or Conflict?

To know how religions and national loyalties may be articulated in EU politics and policies, the best thing is to directly interrogate European political actors. This was the purpose of the survey, Religion at the European Parliament (RelEP), the first attempt of its kind to document what members of the European Parliament (MEPs) believe, and what they do with these beliefs. The purpose was to offer objective data on the role of religion in decision-making, coalition-framing and political socialisation in supranational parliamentary politics. One hundred and sixty-seven MEPs of multiple party and national belongings were interviewed between 2010 and 2013.

The first acknowledgement of MEPs is that the way to relate to faith business differs according to the country of origin. There is near unanimity (82.8 per cent) among interviewees in stressing that religion does indeed have a particular importance, depending on nationality. Religion is often said to create notable differences between representatives of new and old member states, the former being more religious than the latter. Differences between old member states are also perceptible according to the place of religious issues on their own domestic agendas. German Catholics are more focused on economic issues related to religion to protect the fiscal status of German churches; Italian Catholics are particularly involved in debates on how religion is handled in the public sphere in the wake of the controversy over religious signs in classrooms that raged after the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights on the Lautsi case.[1]

This path-dependence relating to the national way of addressing religion is not really altered by the experience of politicians in European institutions. Almost half of MEPs (45.4 per cent) consider that the place of religion at the EP is different from their experience of it in national politics. This perception is especially acute for the representatives who come from very secularised and/or secular (separating strictly religion and politics) backgrounds and who are shocked by the views of religious lobbyists and the occasional priest in a cassock in the corridors of the assembly. However, 31.6 per cent of interviewees—especially those coming from systems with a tradition of denominational diversity and cooperation between religious and political powers—are less surprised by what they see in Brussels and Strasbourg. But surprised or not, there is a consensus (84.7 per cent) among MEPs that their experience at the EP has not changed their views on the links between religion and politics. Their national conceptual frameworks to deal with spiritual matters still prevail.[2]

What may evolve a little is the form of expressing their religious or philosophical beliefs, in order to comply with a multicultural environment where idiosyncratic references rooted in a national memory are less likely to make sense. Religious discourses have to be qualified in intensity to respect all sensibilities, including secular ones, and have also to manage tensions between national memories. A religious figure considered as a virtuous proselyte by Catholics may be seen as an oppressor by Protestant or Orthodox Christians. This resentment of minority denominations against the influence of majority faiths is a constant in European integration.[3]

What is true for MEPs is also true for religious interest groups. Politicians and lobbies have to enter into multi-national

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and multi-faith coalitions and therefore comply with the rule of moderation coming with the Brussels' territory. But MEPs still have privileged connections with national and even local religious communities. Some MEPs adopt strong postures to defend radical religious views at the cost of marginalisation by mainstream political forces at the EP and exclusion from the cooperative mechanisms of the assembly based on compromise. But the purpose of these outsiders is less to act as European legislators than to display their loyalty to their domestic constituencies.

The example of religion at the EP shows how such a normative resource may collide with the usual European policy-making based on rationalisation and bargaining. By definition, a discourse referring to an absolute truth and claiming an authority rooted in the sacred will not be a natural player in a game where virtually everything has to be negotiable. But the EU is also a polity in the making, and religion has been constitutive in the building of all political systems in the history of humanity. It has been to various extents a matrix of national identities for member states and it is now mobilised to legitimate an EU in search of a founding narrative. So the challenge may be to find a place for Europe between the 'nations under God' and God himself, without mentioning other competing geopolitical 'roofs' such as Christianity or the West.

The Religious Heritage of Europe as a Possible Unifying Background

Religion may serve in different ways to justify the project of European integration. It may be used as material in the production of a discourse on European identity; to highlight a similarity of values between European societies; as religious networks and actors to pass the European message. But in these three functions (as content, normative cleavage and go-between), religion may as well be instrumentalised to oppose European integration. The everlasting debate on the Christian heritage of Europe is the best illustration of the dilemma of religion torn between national and supranational belongings.

A controversy has raged since the 1990s on the appropriateness of referring to God and/or to the legacy of Christianity in the preamble of a European constitution and later in various attempts to institutionalise a European memory through museums or other achievements. Religion is then a resource to reinvent a European tradition which existed prior to the nation- state and thus to give primacy to European unity. It also aims at connecting individual beliefs and affiliations with an abstract and alien supranational project.

The motivations for activating a European memory with Christian connotations are of various types. They can be understood at the level of the EU as a political system; in the articulation of the national and the European; and in the to and fro of everyday politics. At a systemic level, the main objective is to endow the EU with a founding myth which is distinct from national histories and which predates them, thus justifying an autonomous European political system. There may also be an attempt to define the historical criteria for belonging to a European cultural community. Societies and populations can be placed in a hierarchy on the basis of these criteria: as longstanding or new member states which have undergone or avoided subjection to communist, atheistic materialism; their historical roles as central heartlands or advanced bastions of Christianity; their level of religiosity/secularisation and/or their dominant religious denomination. They may also be excluded. In articulating the national and the European, religion can serve as an adjustment or resistance variable when adapting national identity to the context of European integration. France, with its secular tradition, opposes any mention of the Christian heritage in European treaties in the name of Enlightenment principles, which are the foundation of its Republican identity.

In contrast, during the Lautsi affair, Italy defended the cultural meaning of crucifixes displayed in classrooms as symbols of national identity. Finally, at the level of the Brussels political game, the churches' demand for recognition of the primacy of Christian values over time aims at more than an acknowledgement of a historical fact. If one subscribes to the idea that the Rights of Man derive from Christianity, the next stage is to recognise a preponderant place for church guardians of the Christian tradition in deliberations over the public good, while also granting special influence over public policy choices to collective preferences informed by Christian values. Finally, religion can also be used to criticise European integration in part or in its entirety. Invoking the Christian foundations of European civilisation confers an authority with which to challenge the excessive materialism or cultural liberalism (on abortion, homosexuality, etc.) of Community policies as a betrayal of common European origins. This may provide an argument for justifying or disqualifying the candidacy of an accession state or for solidarity with a population

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elsewhere in the world that is being persecuted for its convictions.[4]

The failure to achieve any mention of the Christian heritage in the European constitution and the treaty of Lisbon has not marked the end of the symbolic struggle around the reference to religion. Several episodes show that the question is still a live one and is likely to remain so. The main arena for this debate is the European Parliament, which reflects the cultural diversity of European societies and which allows for initiatives by political minorities and NGOs. In 2005, Polish MEPs campaigned to name new Parliament buildings after Karol Wojtyla, Pope John Paul II, to honour his contribution to the fall of communism. Secular forces rejected the promotion of a moral leader hostile to abortion and homosexuality; Protestant and Orthodox Christians resented the grip of Catholics on European symbols, a permanent concern for minority Christian denominations threatened by a Christian Europe turned Catholic.[5] The most recent memory endeavours, such as the 'House of European History' supported by the European Parliament, meet the same temptations and problems in mobilising religion as identity material.[6]

Conclusion

Religion may appear elusive in a European Union which is itself frequently criticised for its abstraction. The addition of two transparent entities is not the most likely solution to create substance. Even when one shifts from domestic to external politics, the diagnosis is not very different. The 'Christian' nature of Europe may be more frequently emphasised by non-Christian parts of the world than by Europeans themselves. But during a traumatic event such as the crisis created by the publication in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* of cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad in 2005–2008, the US and not the EU was the main scapegoat of furious Muslim crowds.[7]

However, religion in Europe is nowadays defined less by a specific content and more as an ethical source irrigating normative choices and as a symbolic marker of identity. As such, beliefs and observance may be less important than the way of relating to religion. Religious heritages can be understood as public goods submitted to inventories according to the needs and tastes of collective and individual actors. Countries are distinguished from others according to the way they exercise this selective relation. Within countries, social groups are differentiated according to their approach to religiously loaded questions rather than in strictly religious terms. So religion keeps marking European societies with its footprint. The divine canopy has many holes, exists in multiple colours and fabrics to accommodate all preferences and overlaps with several other man-made skies, but European nations are still under gods, and the stars of the European flag add simply a little more complexity and variety to the firmament.

Notes

[1] François Foret, *Religion and Politics in the European Union: The Secular Canopy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015), 237-240.

[2] François Foret, 'Religion at the European Parliament: an overview', *Religion, State & Society 2014, Vol 42, Nos 2-3, 130-147.*

[3] Brent F. Nelsen and James L. Guth, *Religion and the Struggle for European Union: Confessional Culture and the Limits of Integration* (Washington, Georgetown University Press, 2014).

[4] For an extensive development, see François Foret and Virginie Riva, 'Religion between nation and Europe. The French and Belgian 'no' to the Christian heritage of Europe', *West European Politics,* (July 2010 33/4) 791–809.

[5] Andrew Rettman, 'Polish MEPs push for Papal plaque in Brussels', *Euobserver*, (14/4/2005)

[6] Committee of Experts, 'Conceptual Basis for a House of European History' report, (October 2008), pp. 11–13.

[7] Jytte Klausen, *The Cartoons that Shook the World*, New Haven, (Yale UP, 2009).

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