

# Religion in the European Union: The Neglected Variable

Written by Brent F. Nelsen and James L. Guth

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BRENT F. NELSEN AND JAMES L. GUTH, DEC 23 2015

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What does religion have to do with European integration? The major approaches to explaining the remarkable success of the European project usually stress economic interests, strategic motivations or institutional forces in the growth of continental unity since 1945. And although constructivist scholars have insisted on a role for ideas and beliefs in the integration process, few have said very much about religion.

Indeed, any argument that European religion matters politically today or in the recent past is immediately suspect. The majestic churches that still dominate urban skylines sit all but empty. Few attend services and even fewer accept traditional dogmas. Scholars may debate whether religion is dying or just transmuted into less recognisable—and less politically salient—‘spiritualties’. But no one can deny that organised religion has lost influence everywhere, even in Catholic strongholds such as Poland and Ireland.

A decline in traditional religion does not mean, however, that religion no longer matters in Europe. Religion shapes cultures in deep and lasting ways. Lives are marked by ceremonies, celebrations and ancient holidays—all filled with emotional power, if drained of theological content. Individual worldviews, once shaped by understandings of God, creation, humanity and revelation, persist in more secular guises from generation to generation. Religion as a social marker still shapes identities by drawing dark lines around ‘us’ and ‘them’—even among those with few ties to organised faith. Thus, religion shapes a ‘confessional culture’ that lingers long after the vibrancy of faith has diminished.

We see religion's impact in both the history and contemporary politics of European integration. Many journalists have observed that the most enthusiastic proponents of ‘ever closer union’ have been the predominantly Catholic countries of continental Europe, while the Protestants of Britain and the Nordic regions have been much more guarded about shifting power towards Brussels. Although most scholars explain away this religious divergence, it reflects fundamental differences in confessional culture: Catholics and their church never really accepted the legitimacy of the Westphalian nation-state system, remembering the ‘unities’ of Rome, Charlemagne's empire, and medieval Christendom. For Protestants of the North (and many in the Netherlands and Germany), the nation-state was the protector of national liberties, and their specific religion became a central aspect of national identity. Of course, these ideals often succumbed to the reality of power politics, but they maintained a tenacious hold on religious leaders, politicians and mass publics alike.

The post-war European project was born out of the concerns of Catholic statesmen, preoccupied with creating permanent peace among the warring tribes of Europe. Robert Schuman of France, Konrad Adenauer of Germany, Alcide de Gaspari of Italy and a host of lesser Christian Democratic politicians saw the creation of supranational European institutions as a way not only to restore prosperity to a devastated continent but also to create a new Europe ‘deeply rooted’, as Schuman put it, ‘in Christian basic values’. Many of these leaders had become acquainted in the 1920s and 1930s and quickly established intricate Catholic and Christian Democratic political networks after the war, opening channels of communication on nascent proposals for new institutions to safeguard peace and

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prosperity and, more importantly, reconcile former enemies in a process of Christian forgiveness. Although there were some 'secular' figures, such as Paul-Henri Spaak, who played significant roles in creating these new European institutions, their ideological rationale had deep Catholic roots.

The institutional developments leading up to the Treaties of Rome in 1957 similarly drew their most enthusiastic support from Christian Democratic parties. To an extraordinary extent not often remembered today, governments in the six nations experimenting with new forms of unity were dominated by Christian Democrats, either governing alone or in coalition. Indeed, European integration went from being an interesting, if unrealistic idea in interwar Catholic circles to a central tenet of Christian Democracy and a vital element of movement identity, so much so that Etienne Borne claimed for the French MRP in 1954: 'We are the party of Europe.'<sup>[1]</sup> The centrality of European federalism to the post-war Christian Democratic vision is easily understood in light of the movement's core tenets: a personalist view of society, concern for the well-being of the family, and reconciliation among former enemies, all of which required new political forms.

The European project also had strong backing from the Vatican and national Catholic hierarchies. Although the Vatican usually refrained from attempting to direct the activity of Christian Democratic parties, the Catholic church still had a powerful moral influence over a continent undergoing a post-war religious resurgence. Pius XII said that he was 'instinctively drawn' to the 'practical realization of European unity'<sup>[2]</sup> and had repeatedly backed the goal of a united Europe from the earliest days of the war.<sup>[3]</sup> Catholic organisations, even as far away as the United States, followed his lead and called for 'some kind of voluntary European union'.<sup>[4]</sup> After the war, in the afterglow of the Hague Conference (1948), Pius again called for a European union.<sup>[5]</sup> In a Catholic Europe not yet experiencing the onset of secularisation, the church's vocal support for unity provided strong encouragement to Catholic statesmen and publics alike.

In fact, one of the most critical contributions of religion to integration was the support provided by grassroots Catholics. Whether taking cues from Christian Democratic politicians or church leaders, Catholic laity were by far the most enthusiastic backers of European unity—and the more devout the Catholic, the stronger the pro-unity views. Although Europe-wide polling on such questions begins with the prototype Eurobarometer in 1970, there is little doubt that the strong support that Catholics exhibited for the project in the 1970s and 1980s was at least as vigorous during the early years of integration. While such public attitudes did not necessarily dictate the action of politicians, it did provide a broad permissive consensus in which national leaders might create supranational institutions. Both the strength and duration of Catholic public support for European unity have been quite impressive.<sup>[6]</sup>

The 'Protestant' reaction to the developing integration process was quite different. Protestant states have consistently resisted handing sovereignty to federal institutions. Britain has always been an 'awkward' European partner, but so have others. Denmark, Sweden and Finland also joined the EU late and have resisted deeper integration. Iceland, Norway and Switzerland are natural EU members but each refuses to join. Historically, these countries have taken a route independent of the continental powers; each was deeply shaped by the Protestant side of the Reformation. Britain and the Nordics feared the very notion of an *ever closer union* and stayed out of the Community as long as their economic and strategic interests allowed. Once inside the house, they proved to be perpetually grumpy family members. After discovering the cost of membership, Britain demanded money back; Denmark's voters nixed the Maastricht Treaty, then reversed course after securing opt-outs from all the significant parts; among Protestant countries only Finland has joined the Eurozone; and other members with large Protestant populations, including Germany and the Netherlands (currently led by Protestants), have vetoed or watered down every attempt to solve the recent Eurozone crisis by giving federal institutions more control over national economies.

And just as support from the Catholic church, Christian Democratic politicians and grassroots Catholics provided the support base for the integration project, 'Euroscepticism' in its earliest forms dominated their Protestant counterparts. The national churches in Protestant countries, whether Lutheran or Anglican, exhibited very little enthusiasm for integration in the years after World War II. Indeed, most remained tied closely to their national regimes and were quite suspicious of what they perceived to be a 'Catholic project'. Although these sentiments began to soften somewhat after Vatican II, it was hard to find much organised Protestant enthusiasm for the European project, even after several Protestant nations finally joined. Even today, their institutional lobbying presence in Brussels pales

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beside that of the Catholic church. The stances of more sectarian Protestant churches in Britain, the Nordic countries and the Netherlands never wavered at all: they remained adamantly opposed to yielding sovereignty to supranational institutions, still fearing encroachment on religious liberty and in some cases, exhibiting ancient anti-Catholic prejudices.

These attitudes have characterised Protestant politicians and publics as well. Although the systematic study of religion's influence among European elites is rare, we have some evidence. Some of the most intriguing is biographical: we can look at the fascinating contrast in attitudes towards integration exhibited by the Methodist grocer's daughter who became the Eurosceptic prime minister of Great Britain—Margaret Thatcher—and the devout French Catholic politician and bureaucrat—Jacques Delors—who was the architect of the European Union's programmatic growth and territorial expansion in the 1980s and 1990s.[7] Even today, it is instructive to observe that the national leaders resisting deeper economic and political integration are Protestants from Britain, Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark and even Germany.

More systematic analysis also confirms religion's influence among elites. Foret's work on the European Parliament finds relatively few differences between Catholics and Protestants but notes that Catholics feel much more comfortable in EU institutions and less likely to identify religion as a source of conflict. A survey of national parliamentary elites also found minimal differences by religious identity of members, but showed that the religious composition of their societies influenced attitudes towards integration. Contrary to the authors' expectations (but consistent with ours), elites in Catholic countries (regardless of their own affiliation) showed the strongest support for integration, with those in Orthodox countries next, followed by those in 'mixed' nations, with elites in Protestant nations bringing up the rear. In a multivariate analysis including many potential influences (economic wealth, regional location and historic experiences), Protestant country elites were still significantly less likely to support further integration; indeed, the coefficient for 'majority Protestant' obtained a higher level of statistical significance than any other variable.[8]

The impact of confessional culture may sometimes be subtle, but that culture continues to shape the functioning of national institutions. A good test case is presented by the EU practice of allowing opt-outs during treaty negotiations and a more recent policy of 'enhanced cooperation'.[9] Enhanced cooperation allows any group of EU states to pursue deeper integration (usually in a specific policy area) beyond that acceptable to other members. Combined with the many opt-outs allowed by treaty, this has created a multi-speed Europe with members participating in a varying number of integration formations. Thus, the number of formations in which a country participates is a reasonable measure of enthusiasm for integration. And, as we would expect, the more Protestant a country, the less often it joins efforts to integrate more deeply. Even controlling for national wealth and the timing of accession to the EU, Protestant countries are much more reluctant to engage in *voluntary* integration.

Work by other scholars suggests additional ways in which confessional culture influences national elite behaviour. Ivy Hamerly found that Protestant confessional culture encourages stronger national oversight of decisions taken in Brussels. If Protestant parties are members of coalition governments when parliaments create European oversight committees, those committees are much more likely to scrutinise Brussels closely than are oversight bodies established by governments that include Catholic or mixed confessional Christian Democratic parties. In other words, the presence of sceptical Protestants produces more scrutiny by parliamentary committees protecting the national interest.[10]

Not surprisingly, the attitudes of Protestant politicians (and of others representing Protestant constituencies) mirror those of Protestant publics. From the very beginning of the Eurobarometer surveys, Protestant citizens have been much less supportive of the European Union (and its predecessors), less likely to prefer more policymaking in Brussels, and less inclined to evaluate EU institutions favourably, even under rigorous controls for other factors more often identified as determinants of such support (nationality, party identification, ideology, political engagement, European identity, economic situation, gender, class and education).[11] Qualitative evidence strongly suggests that church-attending sectarian Protestants are far less supportive of integration than their mainline co-religionists. Eurobarometer affiliation measures are not usually precise enough to identify the small numbers of sectarian Protestants, but where they are, we find them to be fiercely anti-integration.

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One final piece of evidence deals with the critical question of 'European' identity. For many advocates of an 'ever closer union', a crucial requisite is the development of a European 'demos', a large group of citizens who think of themselves as 'Europeans' and identify with European institutions and symbols. Religion matters here as well: in Eurobarometer data there is a strong positive correlation between the proportion of a nation's citizens who think of themselves only as 'nationals' and the proportion who are Protestants ( $r=.419$ ), a relationship that persists in multivariate analysis.

Unfortunately, the Eurobarometer does not permit a direct test of the individual-level relationship between confessional culture and European identity: no survey includes both types of question. But Eurobarometer 65.2 (Spring 2006) permits an indirect approach. That survey asked about an important symbol of European unity, the EU flag: (1) did the respondent identify with the flag, and (2) should the flag be flown next to the national flag on all public buildings? The results are instructive: Catholics are significantly more likely than Protestants to identify with the flag, and even more likely to want it flown. Catholics vary little by their national religious location, but Protestants do. Protestants in the religious majority are quite negative towards the EU flag, while those living in majority Catholic countries are more favourable. Thus, Catholics act as though the EU flag is *their* flag: they identify with it and want to see it flying, but Protestants identify with the flag only when a religious minority. When in the majority, they want nothing to do with it.[12]

Thus, despite the purported secularisation of European politics, we find that confessional culture still affects the movement towards European unity. Of course, that influence has shifted with changes in the religious environment and in the European Union itself. The declining number of observant Catholics and Protestants has weakened religious influences on both pro- and anti-EU sides. The growing ecumenism of Catholic and Protestant churches may explain a recent tendency for the dwindling number of observant Protestants to exhibit more positive attitudes towards integration. The EU's expansion into Eastern Europe has diversified its religious composition, bringing in more Eastern Orthodox and Muslims, often more sceptical about the project. And in recent years the social liberalism of Brussels institutions and the failure to acknowledge religious influences in the proposed unsuccessful Constitution have antagonised traditionalist Catholics from Ireland to Poland, threatening the old pro-EU Catholic consensus.

Why do such changes matter? Put most broadly, the erosion of one of the historic sources of support makes the integration project much more subject to the vagaries of public reactions to the current economic performance of the EU and its member nations—shifting ground indeed compared to the old bedrock of Catholic supranationalism. Will the EU develop a new ideational basis for a renewed 'permissive consensus' on integration? Perhaps, but the task will prove daunting in a deeply divided Europe.

## Notes

[1] Quoted by Wolfram Kaiser, *Christian Democracy and the Origins of European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 189.

[2] Pius XII, 'European Union: An Address of Pope Pius XII to the Congress of Europe, June 14, 1957', *The Pope Speaks* 4 (Summer 1957): 201.

[3] Jacqueline Stuyt, 'Pius XII and European Unity', *Catholic International Outlook* 18, no. 212 (1962): 9.

[4] Catholic Association for International Peace, 'America's Peace Aims', Paulist Press, 1941 as cited in *Plans for European Union in Great Britain and in Exile, 1939-1945*, vol. 2 of *Documents on the History of European Integration*, ed. Walter Lipgens (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1986), 726-727.

[5] Pius XII, 'Address to the European Union of Federalists', quoted in Edward A. Conway, 'Catholics and World Federation', *America* 80 (4 December 1948): 233.

[6] Brent F. Nelsen, James L. Guth and Brian Highsmith, 'Does Religion Still Matter? Religion and Public Attitudes toward Integration in Europe', *Politics and Religion* 4, no. 1 (2011): 1-26; Brent F. Nelsen and James L. Guth,

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'Religion and Youth Support for the European Union', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 41, no. 1 (2003): 89-112; Brent F. Nelsen, James L. Guth and Cleveland R. Fraser, 'Does Religion Matter? Christianity and Public Support for the European Union', *European Union Politics* 2, no. 2 (2001): 191-217; Brent F. Nelsen and James L. Guth, 'Exploring the Gender Gap: Women, Men, and Public Attitudes toward European Integration', *European Union Politics* 1, no. 3 (2000): 267-91.

[7] For an extended comparison of Thatcher and Delors, see Brent F. Nelsen and James L. Guth, *Religion and the Struggle for European Union: Confessional Culture and the Limits of Integration* (Georgetown University Press, in press), Chapter 8.

[8] François Foret, *Religion and Politics in the European Union: The Secular Canopy* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); Wolfgang C. Müller, Marcelo Jenny, and Alejandro Ecker, "The Elites-Masses Gap in European Integration," in *The Europe of Elites: A Study into the Europeanness of Europe's Political and Economic Elites*, ed. Heinrich Best, György Lengyel, and Luca Verzichelli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 167-191. In the multivariate analysis of national legislators, those in Orthodox and mixed religion states are not significantly less supportive of unification than those in Catholic countries, although the mixed category comes fairly close to statistical significance (Mladen Lazić, Miguel Jerez-Mir, Vladimir Vuletić, and Rafael Vázquez-García, 'Patterns of Regional Diversity in Political Elites' Attitudes', in *Europe of Elites*, 147-166, esp. 160-163). Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden were not included in the sample.

[9] For a discussion of the policy of flexibility, see Alexander C-G. Stubb, *Negotiating Flexibility in the European Union: Amsterdam, Nice, and Beyond* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002).

[10] See Ivy Hamerly, 'Christian Democratic Parties and the Domestic Parliamentary Response to European Integration', *Journal of Church & State* 54, no. 2 (2012): 214-239.

[11] See the sources cited in note 6 above.

[12] For more details, see Nelsen and Guth, *Religion and the Struggle for European Union*, Chapter 10.

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