

“Religion between nation and Europe.

The French and Belgian “no” to the Christian heritage of Europe”

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Abstract

Religion has new salience in contemporary European politics, but its range and nature are still not properly understood. In contrast with most other member states, France and Belgium held a common position of refusal regarding any reference to the Christian heritage of Europe in the now defunct Constitutional Treaty. The two countries were however motivated by two different models of *laïcité* anchored in distinct socio-political historical paths: the French all-encompassing *laïcité*, supposing the neutrality of the public space; and the Belgian institutionalized *laïcité*, organizing the pluralism of philosophical and confessional worldviews. The analysis addresses the dynamics of each national configuration in the wider perspective of the interactions between religion and politics today; the patterns of European negotiations; the effects of this issue on domestic politics and mobilizations of civil society. It concludes that religion in the integration process is a way of reformulating old symbolic resources and of coming to terms with identity and social adaptations, rather than a source of political cleavages.

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Political and intellectual debate in Europe today reveals both a new salience of religion and a reinterpretation – rather than a radical interrogation – of secularization. In a world marked by the vitality of spiritual phenomena (Berger 1999), Europe continues to be the exception to the rule (Davie 2002). Interpretations differ regarding the striking contrast between Europe and other regions of similar economic development, such as the United States (Berger et al. 2008), on this point. Some defend the idea of multiple coexisting modernities, characterized by different relations to the sacred (Byrnes and Katzenstein 2006). Others speak of the hollowing out of the religious, which has become for them no more than a cultural resource, normalized and therefore more visible, serving increasingly flexible strategies of identity construction (Capelle-Pogacean et al. 2008).

In this context, the debate around the possible reference to Europe's Christian heritage in the now defunct Constitutional Treatyⁱ, and the positions adopted by certain countries in response to this, are indicative of the transformations of the relationship between belief and power in the context of contemporary socio-political trends. France and Belgium set themselves apart from the other European member states by both refusing this reference, although they did so from significantly different standpoints. Each country is archetypal in this: France and its all-encompassing *laïcité*, supposing the neutrality of the public space; Belgium and its institutionalized *laïcité as a particularism among others*, organizing the multitude of philosophical and confessional worldviewsⁱⁱ. A comparative study of these two countries enables us to shed light on the forces at work in the reshaping of the relationship between religion and politics. This reveals both the degree and the means of the Europeanization of structures, processes, societies, beliefs and identities as well as the resistance offered by each national model and the dynamics of convergence within the context of European integration.

It is important to begin with an appraisal of what was at stake in the debate on Europe's Christian heritage and more specifically how this can be linked to the contemporary uses of

religion in politics (I). The French and Belgian situations are in congruence with this new articulation between the religious and political fields. Here, it is necessary to distinguish two levels of analysis: the evolution of national models and their internal dynamics. France and Belgium reflect the same structuring role of the national historical arrangements between the spiritual and temporal worlds as other member states, with minor influences of domestic and European political circumstances. European countries are part of the same secularizing trend which leads to an erosion of their differences, but they nevertheless remain on their respective trajectories. (II). If we consider internal dynamics, the analysis of domestic debates and socio-political mobilizations in France and Belgium suggests that we are not dealing with a return to faith-based traditional cleavages. On the contrary, it seems that, for certain actors, there is an opportunity to transform their resources with more or less success (III). The religious is thus consolidated in its position as the symbolic vehicle of belonging to a tradition, of political demarcation and identification – without appearing to be an issue that structures partisan behavior. This does not detract from its importance, but leads to it being understood as a communicational phenomenon of self affirmation and expression as well as of social unity, rather than based on content alone. It also seems to be a part of collective culture that functions as a reservoir of meaning, to be freely used for whatever purpose, in accordance with the sociological reality of belief and practice that are today marked by pluralization and individualization.

I. “Christian heritage” in light of the contemporary uses of the religious

Following on from Yves Lambert in the tradition of Weber, Jean-Marie Donegani (2007: 89--92) aptly labels the dominant form of guidance in today’s European societies as axiological. Axiology can be distinguished from *ideology* because it doesn’t prescribe the building of a

certain type of society, nor the realization of a particular vision of history. It is distinguished from classical *religion* in that it not heteronomous and is not concerned with questions of salvation and the hereafter. It is distinguished from *ethics* in that it does not function as a traditional systemization. In this Europe of vague and multiple polarities, the different spheres of social activity (politics, economics, religion, art, and science) are separate and the authorities in charge of each sphere are specialized in that area of activity. This renders impossible any pretention of governing another sphere. The risk is thus that relativism and a conflictual pluralism reign, to the point where no authority is able to subsume, so as to unify, the diverging knowledge and convictions in order to produce a judgment presented as universal. A “monotheism of values” nevertheless emerges, which evokes the existence of a common set of values: pluralist democracy, human rights, non violent conflict resolution, religious indifferentism which holds that all beliefs are equal, tolerance, peace, freedom of the individual and freedom of conscience. The sacred unifying principle no longer takes the form of a homogenous and prescriptive truth, but lies in the primacy of individual sovereignty and the affirmation that each person is free to believe as he sees fit, within the framework of these incorporeal values. The risk of irreconcilable conflict between different social spheres is circumscribed by the pluralization and relativization of belief. This latter loses all pretention to absolutism and the universal; therefore any opposition that it may provoke has only limited force. Beliefs vary in their scope because each of them determines the limits of what is political and what is religious. They also vary in the way they are used; the same religious references can nourish radically different value systems and world views.

The debates surrounding the Christian heritage of Europe are thus to be considered within this general perspective. We have underlined elsewhere the way in which this theme was used by the various actors (governments, political forces and interest groups) as a framework for identity and memory, favoring the development of communication strategies both at the

European and at the national level (Foret and Schlesinger 2006: 59--81). On one hand, the issue for the Churches was obtaining the ability to participate in the decision-making process, as the guardians of a collective tradition and the possessors of an age-old ethical expertise. On the other hand, they sought the recognition of their distinctive identities in the public space, as the active representatives of civil society and as intermediate bodies between political power and the citizen – protecting democracy from political totalitarianism by reference to a source of supreme authority. The promotion of a reference to the Christian heritage of Europe doesn't contradict the thesis of secularization, understood as the loss of religion's social relevance and its decline as the overarching framework of behavior, attitudes and values. What it does signify is the other side of secularization, the culturalization of the religious. The modernity that is incarnated in Europe is accepted as such, with its foundation in a vision of the sovereign individual as the possessor of inalienable rights. In the same movement, the spokespeople for Christianity have attempted to re-appropriate human rights to show that they stem from the Christian understanding of the individual, despite the fact that the Catholic Church long opposed them. Following this process, religion has been reformulated as the common heritage of all Europeans. As it is no longer possible to claim to be the representatives of a now barely credible transcendence, it is the diffuse presence of religion in the collective imaginary of Europeans that is emphasized here, as a particular way of encoding social interaction. There is thus a passage from a religion functioning as a form of determinism, based on a timeless dogma, to a culturalized religion offering the tools to decipher social transformation by proposing a return to the updated origins of European civilization (Kalinowski 2008: 305--310).

The debate around the Christian heritage of Europe is part of a more general trend to return to the origins – particularly medieval – of political constructs. This involves the twofold danger of reifying them as atemporal entities that feed the fantasies of pure unity, or denying them

their importance in the name of their perpetual redefinition (Geary 2004: 23). This brings back the sanctified foundation of political community and the original process of “nationalization” of pre-existing cultural resources (memory, myth, symbols, values and traditions). These were part of the religious domain in the pre-modern era, before the powers of the state borrowed or limited them, to organize and secure the loyalty of the populations it administered (Smith 2003). Today, the re-activation of religious references can serve many purposes. It is rarely used to celebrate the nation in an exclusivist way, as this leads to political marginalization. It is often mobilized in the negotiation of the nation’s attachment to Europe, drawing on the religious to compensate the shock of modernity incarnated by Brussels. This involves a “symbolic exchange”, according to which the national community brings spiritual vitality and the tradition of the stronghold of civilization, to the materialist and amoral supranational sphere. This makes submitting to the EU conditions for membership more acceptable. This discourse can be found in Poland, Romania and even to a certain extent in Turkey where religious forces support European integration as a resource for social pluralisation against the secularist state, whilst promoting Islam for the revival and the reinvention of national identity. The religious reference may also be a means of challenging the implications of European integration on specific issues, in the name of ethics (questions of morals and customs, scientific policy etc.).

All consideration of its validity aside, the debate surrounding Europe’s Christian heritage does not conceal an attempt to return to a former order to be applied on the European level and does not represent a break from the contemporary relationship between politics and religion. Rather, it constitutes another episode in the ongoing redefinition of these relations. In accordance with the now above all expressive and communicational functions of the religious repertoire, the controversy in the European public space has essentially been built around symbolic references rather than institutional organization or the processes of public policy.

This was largely the case in the political and media spheres of the different member states, and notably those which were particularly exposed, such as France and Belgium.

II. France and Belgium: the resilience of national models

Mapping the strategies of nation-states

France and Belgium are far from sharing the same vision of *laïcité*. On one hand, the French state regulates, arbitrates and is the key reference for a pluralism of integration. On the other, the Belgian state guarantees a pluralism of juxtaposition where various particular identities coexist (Martin 1994: 71--83). These two countries do not appear to be those whose national models have most influenced or are the most compatible with the treatment of the religious in Brussels. The German philosophy of recognizing confessional organizations both as co-contributors to the public good and as public policy actors, is often seen as the most convincing “blueprint” for EU practice (Willaime 2004: 108--109). However, the normative neutrality demonstrated in European institutions is assimilated in many cultures to a derivative of French *laïcité*. Given the long, difficult and occasionally controversial emergence of the religious issue on the agenda of the Community, it is possible to see what is happening at the supranational level as the sedimentation and the hybridization of the various national *modus operandi* in the articulation of the religious and the political. The resulting embryo of a European religious policy combines different influences without however leading to an explicit framework.

When it came to promoting the reference to religion in the treaties, the most active leaders were those from concordat signatory countries, with Germany first and foremost. Thus, during the drawing up of the Amsterdam Treaty, declaration 11 in the Appendix of the text, stipulates the EU’s respect for the status of churches and non confessional organizations. This was a

result of an initiative by the German government conveying the proposals of its domestic churches, with the support of Austria, Italy and Portugal. During the convention that prepared the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the impetus to mention “the cultural, religious and humanist heritage” in the text, did not come from religious hierarchies but from the Barvarian Christian democrats of the CSU, with the resolute support of Austria and Luxembourg. Finally, during the convention on the future of the Union, Germany, Poland and Malta were at the forefront of the battle for the mention of God and Christian heritage (Massignon 2007: 215). Amongst those reticent about the religious references in the European texts, Belgium adopted the most aggressive position and the most comprehensive strategy both on a governmental level and in terms of the representation of interests. Spurred on by a militant institutionalized pillar of *laïcité* in the framework of the consociationalist system, the Belgian government supported the action of humanist groups just as Germany supported that of the churches. Belgium is behind paragraph 2 of declaration 11 of the Amsterdam Treaty regarding non-confessional philosophical groups, despite France’s fears that it might be profitable to sects. During the intergovernmental conference of 2003-2004, Belgium led the fight against all mention of Europe’s Christian roots and against the formalization of a specific dialogue between European institutions and the churches, via article 52 of the Constitutional Treaty. Belgium drew in its wake support from many different quarters: Finland, with its very structured humanist movements; Slovenia, very secularized; Great-Britain, hostile to anything resembling a constitutionalization of the treaties but whose humanisms were favorable to article 52; Greece which reproached the text for its lukewarm approach to Christianity etc (Massignon 2007: 221).

Compared with the Belgian offensive strategy, France drew a much more defensive line which was essentially expressed through the government. The overarching conception of French *laïcité* promotes the neutrality of the public space and a direct relationship between the

citizen and the State. There is thus little room in this configuration for intermediary bodies with the mission to defend *laïcité* as a philosophical vision of the world in competition with confessional visions. On this point, the differences in the historical sociopolitical configurations in France and Belgium have produced two different strategies and two distinct types of intervention,. Fundamentally, the French authorities refused any mention of Christian heritage in the European texts on the grounds that it was contrary to French *laïcité*. The idea of a compromise associating both a reference to *laïcité* and to Christian heritage was vaguely sketched towards the end of the intergovernmental conference but never came to anything (Massignon 2007: 219-223).

Different positions but the same kind of deciding factors

If we place France and Belgium within a broader analytic framework regarding the determinants of the positions of the member states in the debate around the Christian heritage, we can see that, with some nuances, the same variables are in operation. The fracture lines between the countries on the question of Christian heritage don't correspond to those formed on other points of contention (for example on the designation of a President of the European Council, or on the modes of state representation within the Commission, or on the question of a European Minister of Foreign Affairs). The historical model of state-church relations (Madeley and Enyedi 2003; Robbers 1997) coupled with the dominant confession, are the most predictive factors, even if they are far from functioning mechanically and without variation. The refusal of both France and Belgium reflects Catholic societies that have separated church and state – at least institutionally. Ireland is in the same category but is placed under the constitutional auspices of the holy Trinity and recognizes the essential social role of the Catholic Church, which explains its “pro-heritage” position. Catholic countries in the tradition of the concordat seem more inclined to support the Christian reference

(Germany, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Poland, Lithuania, and Austria). Finally, those countries where a religion other than Catholicism has traditionally benefited from the status of the State Church, in one form or another (Greece, United Kingdom, Denmark, Finland, Sweden up until 2000), tend to demonstrate a certain reticence towards the mention of Christian heritage in the specific context of the European constitutional debate. Apart from the mobilization of Northern well-organized humanist groups the visible concern here is that of a “Vatican Europe”, of which the religious past is too exclusively understood in the context of Catholicism.

There is thus a combined effect of two historically linked factors, on one hand the national models institutionalizing the relationship between the temporal and the spiritual, and on the other, the impact of the dominant faith of the society in question. Other, more political, variables influence how some countries position themselves in relation to the question of Europe’s Christian heritage, but this was less the case for France and Belgium. Holding the EU presidency, or to a lesser extent either having recently held it or being about to hold it, has encouraged some countries to adopt a more moderate position in order not to affect their capacity to build coalitions and make consensuses. This is visible to differing extents in the cases of Italy towards the end of 2003, Ireland at the beginning of 2004 and in Austria at the beginning of 2006. These are all Catholic countries taking notice of the reality of the forces at work within the Council, in order to moderate their positions. This demonstrates both the range and the limit of the effects of European functions on national agendas and choices; its influence mainly bearing on the register and the intensity of justifications rather than on the nature of the decision. Whether a country has conservative or Christian democrat parties in power is also a transformative element, although it impacts less on the orientation of the member state and more on the intensity with which that orientation is expressed. Spain is a clear example of this. Whilst Aznar’s government took the side of those partisans resolved to

support the reference to Christianity, Zapatero's team demonstrated an open acceptance of a Constitutional Treaty silent on this point. Similarly, Germany found itself defending a more "pro-Christian" line with Angela Merkel than it had with Gerhard Schröder. This is also true for Italy, Slovakia, Malta and Poland, and to a lesser extent for Austria, Portugal and the Netherlands.

In the case of France and Belgium, we can see a clear convergence within the political classes which means those in power have little influence over the position taken, alternative voices heard only peripherally, mainly in the opposition. One may speculate on whether, had Nicolas Sarkozy been in the Elysée, he would have challenged France's opposition to the Christian reference – in light of the positions he has adopted since his election regarding the explicit recognition of France's national Catholic heritage. Re-positioned within this comparative perspective, incorporating the other member states' positions on the debate surrounding the Christian heritage of Europe, France and Belgium only fundamentally differ on the meaning of their responses. The determining factors are to a large extent the same as elsewhere: secularization, religious culturalization, the traditions of church-state relations, with the political circumstance and the holding of European institutional functions having little effect in these two cases. It is worth noting the consensual and stable nature of the attitudes towards European policy within their political classes. It reaffirms the remaining strength of the historical nation-state models of the division of labor and of the articulation between the church and the state.

If we move now from the external analysis of the French and Belgian positions, to the analysis of the internal social and political mobilizations in these two societies, we can see that the discourses on the two visions of *laïcité* remain in contrast, despite recent convergences. France rejected the recognition Europe's Christian heritage in order to preserve the overall symbolic logic of the French Republic, which is one with the nation, independent

of the quite flexible practices found in reality. Belgium did so to defend the internal equilibrium of a consociational political system that is undergoing spiritual diversification and is jeopardized by the erosion of its pillars, but which remains caught in the juxtaposition of its domestic particularisms.

III. Mobilization and the effects of the debate in France and Belgium

The debate around the Christian heritage of Europe is in line with usual European debates – although with a little more intensity than usual. As such, it follows on from the French and Belgian models of political communication on the EU – or the absence of communication. The decision to organize a referendum or not, itself a result of the democratic tradition in each society, only reinforces the differences in the political situations of both countries.

Once we have taken the specificities of each political model into account, the observation is the same: the extent of the publicity around the debate had little effect on its actual impact, which remained limited. The recognition of Europe's Christian origins is above all a symbolic issue that has only the potential to reactivate the historical resources and codes relating to communication and identity for established actors. It does not significantly affect the existing lines between parties and doesn't provoke the emergence of new institutional voices. It is however marginally used to distinguish between leaders of the same political family, thus being a potential source of greater pluralization – if not conflictualization – in political discourse. In order to compare the Belgian and French configurations, it is necessary to successively distinguish between the impact of the general articulation between the national model and Europe, the effects on the party system of accommodating the religious factor, and the dynamics of the social mobilization around the issue of Europe's Christian heritage.

The impact of attaching the national model to Europe

Simple/compound polities and the promotion of the debate about Europe

In order to summarize the Franco-Belgian differences in the processes of political communication surrounding Europe we can borrow the categories used by Vivien Schmidt. Schmidt distinguishes between two types of discourse and two types of polities, according to who speaks, to whom and how. She describes a coordinative discourse, where the principal interlocutors are public policy actors communicating amongst themselves using the language of expertise. This she opposes to a communicative discourse where public policy actors express themselves to the people by mobilizing the language of values (Schmidt 2006: 253--256). Schmidt also distinguishes between simple and compound polities. France falls into the former category, marked by the dominance of the executive, the restriction of the representation of interest groups and strong political polarization. This creates a favorable environment for the communicative discourse in a theatrical exchange between the government and the citizens. Belgium, on the other hand, has a compound system, characterized by the division of powers, a broad consultation of interest groups and politics oriented to consensus. This leads to the primacy of the coordinative discourse. In this typically consociational situation, exchange with citizens does not happen directly but rather through the intermediary of “sub-discourses”, directed to particular audiences with limited publicity (Schmidt 2006: 258--262).

The EU itself consists of a compound political system of extreme complexity, with an extremely elaborate coordinative discourse and a very limited communicative discourse (Schmidt 2006: 262). National leaders and elites in certain sectors remain the chosen mediators and the often biased and partial conveyors of the European message. In countries that are compound polities, the European level simply adds to the plurality of pre-existing

echelons; there is already a great number of actors and specialized coordinative discourses into which supranational issues can be integrated. The situation is more complicated in simple polities. The European coordinative discourse runs counter to the more vertical rhetoric of national politics. Non-governmental actors are rarely associated with the justification of policy and thus do not respond so easily when solicited by Europe on these questions. They may even adopt a strategy of opposition to decisions that they deem to be against their interests or on which they haven't been sufficiently consulted.

One European debate slightly more virulent than another

Placed in this double perspective, the debate on the Christian heritage of Europe is part of the framework of the respective national models of political communication on European issues, in France and Belgium. In France, exchanges were relatively well publicized, given the standard level of discretion regarding EU events. They rapidly turned to a discussion on the philosophical and historical interaction between national identity and *laïcité* in France and its compatibility with a European reference. The principle spokespeople were political leaders and general intellectuals, used to participating in public affairs. Civil society organizations (religious groups and to a lesser extent *laïque* associations) reached limited audiences with their discourses and were often moderate in their approach. In Belgium, in accordance with the traditional *omerta* on European affairs and more broadly with the consociational philosophy, there was no real debate in the public space. This does not necessarily imply a total consensus on the part of political leaders, but when we attentively observe any signs of dissatisfaction in the party discourse regarding the relation with Europe (Pilet and Van Haute 2007) there is scarcely any trace of religious issues. On the other hand, there was vigorous lobbying by humanist networks in civil society and the results were successful in political terms because the government adopted the desired position of refusal.

Each socio-political model thus specifically conditioned the range and means of the debate on Europe's Christian heritage. Whether or not there was a referendum is not so much the cause of differences, but a reflection of the historical division of political labor and the adoption of European themes by France and Belgium. In France, the referendum was a means of developing the debate in the political and public space, even though the religious theme occupied a lesser role in the hierarchy of the campaign issues and the determinants of the vote. In Belgium, voices were raised to call for a referendum or a popular consultation on the European Constitutional Treaty, but the political and juridical difficulties of such an enterprise, involving a modification of the constitution, destined it for defeat (Jacubowitz 2004).

The accommodation of the religious question by the party system

Two roads for religious cleavages and the separation of church and state

Since Belgium's creation, the country has experienced the union of liberal and Catholic forces (unionism). In this process Catholicism learnt to cooperate with the heirs of 1789 in the common fight against Calvinist Holland. There was of course the "separation – recognition" of the church and the stateⁱⁱⁱ, but it was accompanied by an integration of Catholics into the political regime. The end of unionism however, demonstrated a deep opposition between liberals and Catholics concerning freedom of education. It wasn't until 1884, that sufficient support was mobilized to launch an electorally successful Catholic party.

In the 19th century, France was to become a pioneer in the elaboration of Christian democracy. As Hans Maier demonstrates, this was precisely because here, more than anywhere else, the revolution had attempted to eradicate religion by force (Maier 1992).

Marginalized by the Republican victory in 1880, the massive influx of Catholics into French politics following the Second World War represents a significant turnaround, linked to their role in the resistance. But the fledgling MRP (*Mouvement républicain populaire*) never managed to gain a solid foothold in the political scene – contrary to the situation in Belgium. Belgian Christian democracy (CVP, *Christelijke Volkspartij*, which became *Christen Democratische & Vlaams* on the Flemish side and the PSC, *Parti social chrétien* which became the CDH *Centre Démocrate Humaniste* on the Walloon side), although dominant for a long time on the political scene, has nevertheless undergone significant contemporary re-organization, which is important to take into consideration here. Both France and Belgium have been affected by the deepening of the process of secularization which has in part neutralized the conflict between the political and the religious spheres. In Belgium, political mobilization has re-formed around linguistic and territorial debates rather than religious ones, whereas in France the Fifth Republic has meant a reduction in the traditional hostility between the Republican and Catholic traditions (Girvin 2000). Mobilization in favor of the Christian reference should thus be placed within this impossible context – of both a French-style Christian democracy and of a Christian democracy being re-formed in Belgium on the basis of European political secularization.

Political initiatives in favor of a reference to the Christian roots of Europe

In both countries, a few individual initiatives took place from center-right Christian democracy to conservatives and extreme right. It did not lead to shifts of political lines and cleavages.

In France, as a symbol, François Bayrou, president of the UDF (*Union pour la démocratie française*) and then of Modem (*Mouvement démocrate*), who is heir to the Christian democrat tradition and a practicing Catholic, campaigned for a *laïque* European Constitution, without

reference to the Christian roots of Europe^{iv}. This seems to perpetuate the impossibility of a Christian major position in French public space. Other minor Catholic political figures from the same movement (Christine Boutin, Richard dell’Agnola, with the necessary addition of the UMP senator Hubert Haenel) defended the reference to Christianity. The theme functions as a way of differentiating between leaders without constituting a major issue. The idea of a French “Catholic party” which unconditionally supports Europe as a Christian club has to be considerably nuanced. The myth of a “Vatican Europe” was spread in France more than anywhere else during the debate around the EDC in 1954 and resurfaced during the Constitutional process. However, we must not forget that French Christian democrats were divided from the beginnings of integration (Chenaux 2007, 88-89 ; 75-81). Their hostility towards Germany was not relegated to secondary importance until after the concretization of the communist threat, particularly following the “Czech coup”, and the materialist and technocratic market philosophy of the ECSC and the EEC, did not fully satisfy their expectations. It was under pressure from the historical situation and electoral competition by the Gaullists, that they progressively rallied to the European cause. This does not exclude certain Gallican throwbacks even today.

Since the year 2000, the principal political and social mobilizations in support of the recognition of Christian roots have been from the Catholic conservative right, in the tradition of *Action Française*. They can be attributed to the euro skeptic movement reorganized by Philippe de Villiers within the MPF (*Mouvement pour la France*) since 1994. The opposition to the project of European integration is its reason for being, which makes it a particular type of euro skepticism (Harmsen 2007). A petition led by the *Fondation de Service Politique* and supported by the former European Member of Parliament MPF Eizabeth Monfort collected ninety thousand signatures in France.

On the Belgian side of things, during the intergovernmental conference, the president of the Chamber of representatives Herman De Croo affirmed that “the reference to the Judeo-Christian tradition in the European constitution was not really a subject of dissension in Belgium”^v. The issue was slightly more salient in the Flemish-speaking part of the country, which was affected by the secularization trend a little less and a little later than the French-speaking part (Voyé, Dobbelaere, 2000)^{vi}. In Flanders, the defense of the Christian reference is a result of the actions of individuals more involved in Christian democracy than in France^{vii}. For example, Herman von Rompuy, who subsequently became Prime Minister in 2008 and President of the European Council in 2009, was then one of two spokesmen for the Federal Advisory Committee on European Affairs^{viii} and advocated the inscription of Judeo-Christian values in the proposed preamble to the European constitutional treaty. The CD&V Senator Mia de Schamphelaere demanded an explanation following the speech by a government representative to the intergouvernemental conference. A lobby was set up within the CD&V party, called “*C axent*”, composed of Catholics and Evangelists. It became a member of the new European political movement known as the European Christian Political Movement (ECPM), founded by the small Dutch organization *ChristenUnie*. The ECPM announced its principal objective thus: “[the ECPM] wants to reinforce Christian social politics on every political level in Europe and so to build on our societies”^{ix}. It is interesting to note the convergence between France and Belgium here, in the birth of Christian organisations within political parties, aiming to influence the direction of those parties. This is the case for the *Fondation de Service Politique*, close to the MPF^x and the *C axent* movement within the CD&V in Flanders.

In Wallonia, the question of Christian heritage could not emerge. In May of 2002, the PSC (*Parti social chrétien*) became the CDH (*Centre démocrate humaniste*) as the result of several years of interrogation about its identity and its position and in order to address its electoral

decline (Wynants 2005). This decision reflects the consequences of secularization in Belgium – and particularly in the francophone region: “it is the renegotiation of the place occupied by the institutional Christian world and its specific concerns, within the social and political space” (Van Campenhoudt 1996). The CDH supported Mia de Schamphelaere’s movement in favor of Article 52 of the Constitutional Treaty, on the role of the churches in European deliberations; but it was unthinkable to do the same concerning the preamble. It can be seen in a kind of continuity with the legacy of Belgian Christian democracy since the beginning of European integration. It has been an active force in building Europe as a consociational polity very much like their national one, with a dull and reassuring political style, a keenness to compromise^{xi}, to form transnational coalitions and to avoid the politicization of religion (Kaiser 2007, 171 sq.). Former members of the *Parti social chrétien* nevertheless resisted, leading to the development of the *Parti des Chrétiens démocrates francophones* (CDF), which was to be the only Belgian political formation to defend the reference to Christian heritage during the 2004 European elections. The CDF became a member of the ECPM movement but was swept out of the political scene in Wallonia.

A final important figure from the Belgian Christian democrat movement emerged in this context: Gérard Deprez, who was the leader of the *Parti social chrétien* from 1981 to 1996, and who is today member of the European parliament for the ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe). He also founded the MCC movement (*Mouvement des Citoyens pour le Changement*) within the liberal party (MR) and has thus been one of the few voices in Belgium to publicly support the mention of Europe’s Christian heritage in the preamble of the European Constitutional Treaty. His complex career is a further reason to believe that this theme is a resource for personal differentiation rather than a key variable that structures partisan politics.

Finally, a number of extremist actors took up a position in this debate. In Flanders, two figures from Vlaams Belang, Guido Tastenhoye and Alexandra Cohen proposed a resolution concerning the insertion of a Christian reference in the European Constitutional Treaty on the 6th of November 2003^{xii}. In Wallonia, several conferences were organized around the small *Belgique et Chrétienté* movement that incorporated Bruno Gollnisch from the Front National^{xiii}. In France however, the far right was much less active in the debate around the reference to Europe's Christian roots than it had been during the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty.

To summarize what happened in party politics, a new intransigence was observable amongst certain Catholic conservatives in the French debate. In Belgium on the other hand, the Church had abandoned the intransigence early on, during the condemnation of Rexism in 1935. Only isolated claims for identity recognition from Flemish and Walloon Christian democrats remain. In both countries, the career paths, the marginality and the electoral failures of the political leaders concerned disprove the hypothesis of a convergence between Christian democracy and conservatism around a resalience of religion (Delwit 2003). The interpretation is rather that the religious theme functions as a political resource that moderates the cartelization of parties in their pro-European unanimity. It offers a symbolic vehicle for some "adventurers" to set themselves apart in criticizing an overly materialistic Europe and denouncing its attacks on the national identities entrenched in the Catholic tradition.

Mobilization of civil society

The strong depoliticization of Church discourses did not encourage Catholic laymen to advocate the defense of their identity reference. The Belgian and the French Catholic Churches appear similar both in their prudence regarding public statements as well as in their

continuous support for the construction of Europe. This is what we see in the archives of the Bishops' conferences of France and Belgium, with different inflections from one country to the other. Thus, in Belgium it is openness to the other and pluralism that are emphasized, centered around a vision of Brussels as the capital of openness and cosmopolitanism. However, the recently expressed position of the Bishop of Namur is out of step with the prudence of the Belgian primate^{xiv}.

For the confessional and philosophical organizations connected with the EU, as well as in most member states, the institutionalization of a specific dialogue with European institutions via Article 52 of the Constitutional Treaty was a more important issue than the debate around the Christian heritage, although it attracted less media attention. The content and tone of the public statements of such organizations in the two countries reflect this. In France, emphasis is put on the adaptation to the *laïque* regime. In Wallonia the debate focused essentially on the institutional question, as the positions of the *Centre d'Action Laïque* (CAL), the *Centre Interdiocésain des Laïcs* (a Catholic organization) and the United Protestant Church of Belgium demonstrate^{xv}. Confrontations between organized *laïcité* and religious representatives led to complex alliances crossing both confessional and philosophical cleavages as well as international borders. For example, the European Humanist Federation (in which the Belgian CAL is an essential element) and French dissident Catholicism incarnated by the *Fédération des Réseaux du Parvis* came together to denounce the new privileged relationship between political and religious institutions and the risk of civil society becoming powerless, in contradiction with the principles of participative democracy.

Next to the institutional question, Europe is also seen as a structure offering favorable opportunities for spreading the religious message. This does not appear in the guise of a conscious proselytism but rather as the contribution to the redefinition of citizenship in the pluralist European context. One instance of this is particularly interesting: the Brussels-

Toussaint Congress in 2006 (28 October – 5 November 2006), the “International Week of Evangelism and Humanism in Towns”, organized by the Cardinals Danneels, Lustiger, Schönborg, and Policarpo. This week of evangelism was interpreted by Belgian organized *laïcité* as an attempt by the Catholics to win ground, and some workshops expressed a certain nostalgia or even a desire to breathe Christian spirit back into Belgium via Europe^{xvi}. More generally, Christian engagement has been put forward as a way of developing active European citizenship. This venture by the Belgian Church was at the heart of Jean-Paul II’s speech when he visited Belgium in 1985. He stressed that “attachment to the Catholic faith was an essential link holding the Belgian nation together”, and insisted on Belgium’s contribution to ecumenism^{xvii}, both through its history and its theologians. One of them, Gustave Thils (1990), defended the idea of “plural unity” for Europe, following Edgar Morin’s line of thought, and arguing that holding onto a national Christian past as an element upon which to build political cohesion in Europe was a mistake.

Similarly in France, the ecclesial hierarchy was moderately inclined to support a political discourse on the Christian roots of Europe and often appeared to tag along with the Vatican on this issue. Since the condemnation of *Action Française* in 1926 and the abandonment of any attempt for unified political action, but also in accordance with the political pluralism of Catholics on the issue of European unification, the French Catholic Church was obliged to take a back seat (Airiau 2007). It is much more attentive in the negotiation to adapt the French *laïque* regime in matters of public policy..

Conclusion

Considering the global picture of national models, the debate around the Christian heritage of Europe in France and Belgium confirms the contemporary status of religion. It followed the historical path of national institutional arrangements between temporal and

spiritual worlds. It tended to show the resilience of stable mainstream national views on politics and religion. It does not necessarily mean that there was a consensus, but it implied an agreement on a *modus vivendi* or at least a way of disagreeing that was “made in France” and “made in Belgium”. This relative quiescence to deal with the place of a long-lasting and largely weakened Christian heritage could have left room for a far more controversial scenario if newer and more active forms of religiosity (Islam, cults) had been the central issue.

Turning now to French and Belgian internal political life, the debate seems to have reactivated symbolic resources of differentiation and the expression of particular identities rather than genuine cleavages. In France, we observe a certain resurgence of religiously oriented identity demands; claims that have been largely appeased in the public space since the end of the 1920s and have been voiced ever since by actors on the periphery of the religious and political spheres (Déloye and Riva 2007). Marginal Catholic forces hostile to the forms and principles of European integration use religion to attempt to gain an audience on the issue of national identity and to develop transnational structures and strategies. In Belgium, the religious question also lost its controversial character from the first half of the 20th century onwards, notably thanks to the pacifying effects of “consociationalism” (Frognier 2007). Religion has definitively been bypassed by the linguistic and territorial divide as the strongest impulse behind the identity struggles in Belgium. It cannot erupt outside the limited confrontations between organized *laïcité* and a not very invasive Catholic Church, careful in its actions and discourses. Moreover, this cleavage has been bypassed at the transnational and European level by unexpected alliances between French Catholics and Belgian humanists in opposition to Article 52^{xviii}.

The episode of the Christian heritage of Europe did not lead to a reconflictualization either in Belgium or in France. The European framework simply allowed for the prolongation of a battle that was exhausted at the national level – transforming it into a struggle to resist or to

accommodate change. More generally, the religious repertoire is above all instrumental and serves as a platform for socio-political demands regarding recognition and reassurance; it is molded by historic national models and European policy channels. These functions and secondarity of religion are reminiscent of what happened with more intensity in other less secularized member states, where national histories and the requirements for belonging to the EU are also hinged upon the religious as both a site of collision and mutual arrangements. This encourages us to reassess the apparent specificities of France and Belgium: two singular forms of *laïcité* quite distinct from each other, but which are simply encountering questions common to all European societies.

Notes

ⁱ The analysis is focused on this debate which is more revealing both in its scope and its constitutional implications, without neglecting the importance of the debate that preceded it, during the drawing up of the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

ⁱⁱ Our purpose here is neither to discuss the normative value or efficiency of “*laïcité*” (for a criticism of its social uses in France and a defense of the principle, see Laborde 2008) nor the actual existence of a European “*laïcité*” understood as a common set of principles for all member states of the EU (Willaime, 2010). We address “*laïcité*” as an empirical category which is widely used by institutions and actors to describe national settings of relationships between politics and religion and which is given various meanings to relate positively or negatively to Europe.

ⁱⁱⁱ Belgium has a system that could be described as being based on « separation-recognition ». This was born out of the 1831 constitution and amended several times since. Over the years, it has shown considerable flexibility in its capacity of adapting to change. Belgium has therefore never known the Concordat: the 1831 constitution allows for the organization of a system of support to recognized religions without mentioning juridical agreements.

^{iv} This was not the first time that François Bayrou took a public stance in defense of *laïcité*. He protested in 2005 against the decision to put national flags at half mast following the death of John Paul II as a foreign head of

state. He repeatedly criticized the idea of *laïcité positive*, promoted by Nicolas Sarkozy, giving more space and recognition to religion. As a biographer of King Henri IV known as the King who introduced religious tolerance in France, Bayrou claims that freedom of religion has to be enjoyed in the private sphere. His statement in the European debate is thus in the continuity of his line in national politics.

^v Informations parlementaires, 51^e législature, Semaine du 31 mai au 4 juin 2004.

^{vi} As an illustration, in 2006, 69 % of children are christened in Flanders and 54% in Wallonia. 70 % of burials are religious compared to 53 % in the French-speaking region.

http://www.ined.fr/fichier/t_telechargement/19886/telechargement_fichier_fr_fiche_actualite7bis.pdf,

accessed 29/11/2009

^{vii} Voices are raised however from other political movements, such as that of the VLD Senator Pierre Chevalier “I do not wish to come back to those great ideological discussions relating to the Preamble. We regret the way some things evolved, precisely the position taken by the Belgian government on several religious themes. The importance of religion throughout European history and Belgian history cannot be denied. The images of Charlemagne and Godfrey of Bouillon in this chamber evoke Christianity”. *Annales du Sénat* du 5 décembre au matin, n°3-25, 2003

^{viii} DOC Chambre 0312/001, DOC Sénat 3-219, 20 Octobre 2003.

^{ix} ECPM, Campaigning Manual.

^x This is a situation that can also be found in Italy, within the National Alliance party, via the Catholic Alliance association.

^{xi} Belgian Christian Democrats were among the most reluctant to form an alliance with the British Conservatives at the European level because of Margaret Thatcher’s fierce opposition to social-democrats, who were government partners at the Belgian level (Johansson 2005, 138).

^{xii} DOC 51 0392/001, Chambre.

^{xiii} On the 1st of May 2005 the non-profit organization *Belgique et chrétienté* organised a conference entitled : “The European Constitution and the entry of Turkey into the European Union : two scourges on Christian Europe, two reasons for taking action”.

^{xiv} « Conflit au sein de l’Eglise belge sur l’attitude face à la société libérale », *Le Monde*, 8-9 avril 2007, p. 8

^{xv} See *Plural*, an information bulletin distributed by the « Observatoire des Relations Administratives entre les Cultes, la Laïcité organisée et l’Etat », vol 1. n°12/2, p. 13-16, 2003.

^{xvi} For example via the round table « Christian faith and the future of Europe », organized at the initiative of the OCIPE, the Jesuit European Office, and ESPACES, Spiritualities, Cultures and Societies in Europe. This brought together Thomas Jansen, the former Head of the Private Office of the President of the European Economic and Social Committee, Maria Martens, Member of the European Parliament, M. Glück, the President of the Barvarian Landtag, His Eminence van Luyn, President of the COMECE, the Commission of Bishops Conferences of the European Community, under the Presidency of His Eminence de Kesel and with the Dominican Father Ignace Berten as moderator.

^{xvii} « Industrialized land at the heart of Western Europe, your nation has for many years welcomed men and women from different countries in search of work and a place of freedom. Amongst them many have been Christian and some belong to different Christian traditions. Has there not been an invitation there to extend our hospitality, in a broader fraternal cooperation with other disciples of the same Lord ? The presence of numerous immigrants – in some regions particularly – and the establishment of certain international organizations in Brussels, are factors that have enlarged in you an ecumenical conscience. » La Documentation catholique, n°1899, 7 juillet 1985, p. 670.

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