

Religion, European Elections and EU politics. A Resilient Second-Order Factor for a Second-Order Polity?

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Introduction¹

Religion has unexpectedly come back to the fore of the European political agenda. Its renewed salience in security (radicalization, migrations, international affairs) and identity (culture, memory, morality) politics contrasts with its assumed decline as a structuring force in voting behaviour and party alignment. The present article illuminates this contrast and relates it to the larger picture of secularization, and of the recombination of the relationships between religion and politics in the European Union (EU). As the representative body of the EU, the European Parliament (EP) reflects the European ideological, cultural and denominational diversity. As such, it offers a structure of opportunity for the expression of religiously-inspired forces and for the conflictualization of religiously-loaded issues. Looking both at the electoral campaign, the elections and parliamentary politics, we offer an assessment of the salience, forms, and effects of the influence of religion in the last European parliamentary term (2014-19) and suggest potential developments for the incoming one (2019-24).

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Regarding sources and methods, we rely on secondary sources, a synthesis of the state of the art and the findings of our past and ongoing research. Besides, we offer a fresh study of three interrelated case studies used as touchstones of the ongoing recombination between religious and political affairs in the EU. First, the decline of Christian Democracy at all levels of European governance goes hand in hand with the de-institutionalization of the sacred rendering it available for any political instrumentalization. Second, the so-called Hungarian crisis—i.e., the conflictual relationships between Viktor Orbán’s government, other European Member States and EU institutions—involved several religious issues: the status of confessional denominations in Hungary; the management of migration and asylum policies, including discrimination between Christian and non-Christian migrants; and Orbán’s stated ambition to reshape Christian Democracy and to revitalize the Christian identity of Europe. Third, the ‘*Spitzenkandidaten* process’ to select the EPP candidate running for the presidency of the Commission confronted two mainstream interpretations of the Christian democratic tradition and ways to refer to religion articulated by Manfred Weber and Alexander Stubb.

The article is organized as follows. The religious factor is considered alternatively as an influence on political attitudes and voting; as an ideological and party component; and as a controversial policy stake. We first cast light on the religious factor in past European elections as an element framing political attitudes and behaviours towards Europe. We then analyse the crisis affecting the Christian-Democratic family incarnated by the European People’s Party (EPP) and what it says about the effects of religion in European parliamentary politics. We finally document the treatment of religion as a policy issue within the EP and as a potential bone of contention in the incoming term.

Religion, Attitudes and Behaviours Towards Europe: An Influence Rather Than a Matrix

In European democracies, the impact of religious cleavages on electoral choices is still an under-documented question with regard to the rich scholarship existing on the American case². It is usual to distinguish the confessional cleavage between denominations, on the one hand, and the clerical cleavage between religious and secular voters, on the other hand. Both have evolved over time in response either to changes in society and among individuals (when faith is losing salience at the collective and/or personal levels), or to transformations in the messages articulated by political parties (when religious issues become the stakes

2. Ryan Claassen, *Godless Democrats and Pious Republicans? Party Activists, Party Capture, and the ‘God Gap’* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). ; William D’Antonio, Steven A. Tuch and Josiah R. Baker, *Religion, Politics, and Polarization: How Religiopolitical Conflict Is Changing Congress and American Democracy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013).

of partisan competition and electoral campaigns). There is no consensus on the extent, nor on what has triggered this weakening trend. Some scholars advocate that the shifting effects of religious cleavages on elections mainly reflect global societal change. In short, secularization and the sophistication of citizens relying less on institutions to make their choice would weaken the influence of religion. Other bodies of research suggest that the strategies of parties also matter, according to the extent they address (or not) religiously-loaded issues and pass alliances with religious groups³.

Against this general background, the role of religion in the framing of attitudes and behaviours towards Europe is both declining *and* differing from one national context to another. The religious factor is secondary to, and interacting with, many other factors such as feelings about economic conditions, trust in government, sense of a European identity, as well as age, gender, social class, geographic location or partisanship. Religion needs to be broken down into several usual variables: belonging, behaving and religiosity. Beginning with belonging, Protestants are more likely to be Eurosceptic than Catholics⁴, with the latter's lifetime embrace of the supranational project contrasting with the former's incremental approach to the very idea of a federated Union⁵. Meanwhile, faith happens to be so intertwined with national culture that the denominational factor becomes submitted to the domestic context. For example, in the Brexit vote – “a behavioural expression of Euroscepticism”⁶ – Anglicans' support to the Leave camp traces back to the founding role of the Church of England in the development of the country's national identity, political system, language and culture. Their widespread opposition to the EU testifies to the “secular continuance of an originally religious stance”⁷ – i.e., a “[faith-based] resistance to joining with continental ‘Catholic’ projects”⁸. The British case illustrates how denominational

3. Christopher Raymond, “Electoral Choice and Religion: An Overview”, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics & Religion*, eds. Paul Djupe, Gizern Arian (2018), <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-672>.

4. Angelica Scheuer and Wouter Van der Brug, “Locating support for European integration”, in *European Elections and Domestic Politics: Lessons from the Past and Scenarios for the Future*, eds. Wouter Van der Brug and Cees Van der Eijk (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 2007, 94–115.

5. Brent Nelsen and James Guth, *Religion and the Struggle for European Union. Confessional Culture and the Limits of Integration* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press), 2015.

6. Ekaterina Kolpinskaya and Stuart Fox, “Praying on Brexit? Unpicking the Effect of Religion on Support for European Union Integration and Membership”, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 57, no. 3 (2019): 1–19.

7. John Milbank, “Divided Island: Brexit, Religion and Culture”, *ABC Religion & Ethics*, 2016, available at <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/divided-island-brexit-religion-and-culture/10096772>. Accessed January 8, 2019.

8. Brent Nelsen and James Guth, “Prelude to Brexit: Euroscepticism in Great Britain, 2014”, 9th International Conference on Social Science Methodology – University of Leicester (2016), https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/sociology/research/rc33-conference/25_guth.

attachments influence both the utilitarian assessments and the affective attachments to the Union.

Similarly, close intertwinements between religion and nationality can be found in Central and Eastern Europe, where the political transition from an atheist communism to democracy and the recovery of independence triggered the rise of religiously-inspired nationalisms⁹. That being said, the effects of Orthodoxy are diverse and split by region¹⁰. In Greece and other Balkan countries hit by dramatic economic difficulties, denominational differences may be reactivated as a mark of distinction from an EU perceived as enforcing austerity norms, promoting culturally liberal measures, and turning the Orthodox populations into ‘second order citizens’. Overall, however, Orthodoxy has a small net positive impact on support for European integration. By contrast, the minority confession of Islam exerts a slightly negative impact on citizens’ attitudes towards the EU¹¹.

A second religious variable corresponds to religiosity, understood as the intensity of belief (belonging) and observance (behaving). Some studies show that a higher level of religious commitment reinforces one’s attachment to the supranational project and policies¹², while others do not highlight such a phenomenon¹³. A secondary element is religious intolerance, as the rejection of other faiths constitutes a strong predictor of Euroscepticism¹⁴.

Shifting from attitudes to voting behaviours, the picture is not totally clear due to a lack of data and of longitudinal studies since the introduction of universal suffrage for the European elections. Scholars suggest a steady decline of the religious impact on party choice at EU level¹⁵, largely due to the generational replacement phenomenon and its strengthening effect on secularization¹⁶. However, the situation differs from one society to another: the higher religious pluralism is, the more religion can be expected to interfere in party choice. Besides, despite its decline, religion continues to be more decisive for the structure of the vote in

9. Lucian Leustean, *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Abington: Routledge, 2014).

10. Lucian Leustean, “Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century. An Overview”, in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Lucian Leustean (Abington: Routledge, 2014), 1–20.

11. Brent Nelsen, James 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.

12. Brent Nelsen, James Guth, Cleveland Fraser, “Does Religion Matter? Christianity and Public Support for the European Union”, *European Union Politics* 2, no. 2 (2001): 191–217.

13. Sara Hobolt, Wouter Van der Brug, Claes H. de Vreese, Hajo Boomgaarden, Malte Hinrichsen, “Religious Intolerance and Euroscepticism”, *European Union Politics* 12, no. 3, (2011): 359–379.

14. Sara Hobolt, “The Brexit Vote: A Divided Nation, a Divided Continent”, *Journal of European Integration* 23, no. 9 (2016): 1259–1277.

15. Wouter Van der Brug, Sarah Hobolt and Cees H. de Vreese. “Religion and Party Choice in Europe”, *West European Politics* 32, no. 6 (2009): 1266–1283.

16. Ronald Inglehart, “The Silent Revolution in Europe: Intergenerational Change in Post-industrial Societies”, *The American Political Science Review* 65, no. 4 (1971): 991–1017; Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular. Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd Ed., 2011).

European elections than social class or than attitudes towards the EU. In the same way, religion keeps discriminating between parties: religiosity has a positive effect on voting for Conservative and Christian-Democratic parties (with no specific advantage for the latter despite their spiritual heritage); it plays no decisive role for Liberal and Eurosceptic parties, and even less for the Greens, the far-right or leftist parties¹⁷.

Against this sociological background and considering the lack of direct EU competencies in this matter, religion takes an unsurprisingly tiny place in party manifestos for European elections. This suggests that religion is not likely to be a structuring force in party politics at the European Parliament. Yet, we will show that the May 2019 elections are truly displaying faith-based overtones, as attested by Christian Democrats' identity crisis and the politicization of morality (i.e., religiously-loaded) issues on the supranational agenda.

*Grandeur and Decadence of Christian Democracy:
End or Renewal of Religious Influence in EU Party Politics?*

The leading role of Christian democracy in the building of Europe has been a main venue for the influence of religion. Christian democratic parties have historically been supportive of the supranational project. Nonetheless, the strong presence and representation of Christian Democrats among Europe's main leaders may also be read as a 'hegemony by default'¹⁸ arising from the governing position they used to endorse in many Member States by the time. Besides, this hegemony did not suffice to impose a spiritual worldview onto a Union made of steel, coal and traders¹⁹. The actual imprint that the Christian-Democratic doctrine has left on European Treaties is still a matter of ongoing debates²⁰: the Maastricht Treaty, for example, consecrated the subordination of popular sovereignty to supranational rules and economic orthodoxy, themselves at odds with the social dimension of Christian Democracy.

Today, Christian Democracy as a political ideology is not represented homogeneously across Europe, especially in Eastern Europe²¹ and has been facing a steady decline. The label is also challenged internally by reinterpretations of its meaning.

17. Angelica Scheuer and Wouter Van der Brug, "Locating support for European integration" in *European Elections and Domestic Politics: Lessons from the Past and Scenarios for the Future*, eds. Wouter Van der Brug, Cees. Van der Eijk (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 94–115

18. Wolfram Kaiser, *Christian Democracy and the Origins of the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007),

19. Michael Gehler and Wolfram Kaiser, eds., *Christian Democracy in Europe since 1945* (London, Routledge, 2004).

20. Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, "Vers un modèle de démocratie chrétienne ? Politique et religion dans le Traité de Lisbonne", *Revue française de science politique* 65, no. 4 (2015): 563–582; Philippe Chenaux, *De la chrétienté à l'Europe. Les catholiques et l'idée européenne au XX^e siècle* (Tours: CID Éditions, 2007).

21. Anna Grzymala-Busse, "Why There Is (Almost) No Christian Democracy in Post-Communist Europe", *Party Politics* 19, no. 2 (2013): 319–342.

New forces and discourses are currently making fresh political uses of religion as a strategic resource eager to serve identity politics. Both the Hungarian rule of law crisis and the 2018-2019 *Spitzenkandidaten* process give evidence of these renewed occurrences of religion as an empty signifier instrumentalized to reframe European internal/external power games.

The so-called Hungarian crisis illustrates a use of religion to dispute the ownership and the boundaries of Christian-democratic ideology. Orbán claims a complete refoundation of the founding narrative of this party family under his aegis. Compared to this ‘coup’ coming from the fringes, the *Spitzenkandidaten* process dramatizes the place of religion in the confrontation of two mainstream interpretations of the Christian democratic traditions by Weber and Stubb.

The Hungarian Crisis: A Challenge to the Core and Boundaries of Christian Democracy

The tensions between Hungary, other European Member States and EU institutions are not triggered by religion *per se*, but the latter constitutes both an issue in the controversial implementation of the rule of law in the country, and a symbolic resource abundantly mobilized by Orbán in the battle for cultural hegemony throughout Europe. The 2012 Hungarian New Fundamental Law recognizes the essential role of Christian values in preserving nationhood, although Hungary does not have an official state religion. While the separation of church and state is legally enshrined, special provisions provide established religious communities with cooperation privileges. This consolidates the “politically preferred, [demographically] large, historically grounded Christian Churches”²².

Besides being a bone of contention as a domestic issue, religion is also a symbolic resource instrumentalized by Viktor Orbán to claim leadership within the EPP. He advocates a return to the spiritual roots of Christian Democracy so as to revive its confessional meaning and ambition. As a spokesperson of ‘the European civilization’ in the world, he stated at the November 2018 EPP Helsinki Congress: “Let us get back to our spiritual roots—let us proclaim the renaissance of Christianity”²³. This self-attributed religious dimension is not evident: Fidesz used to advocate anti-clerical liberal stances when it was founded in 1988. By the mid-1990s, its leaders operated a right-wing turn and found in religion a strategic and instrumental resource filled with the historical and cultural symbols likely to anchor their electoral power in the long run. Meanwhile, the development of Christian Democracy in the country is limited to the case of the KDNP (Fidesz’s satellite party and coalition partner since 2002).

22. Ádám Zoltán and András Bozóki, “The God of Hungarians’. Religion and Right-Wing Populism in Hungary”, in *Saving the People. How Populists Hijack Religion*, eds. Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, Olivier Roy (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 129–147, 143.

23. Florian Eder. “What Makes a Christian Democratic Party Family?”, *Politico*, November 9, 2018.

The domestic and international religious dimensions of Hungarian politics provoked ambivalent reactions from the EPP, shared between the concern to stand for its principles and the strategic necessity to close ranks for the European elections. Most of the reactions by national parties are motivated by a general assessment of breaches of the rule of law by the Hungarian government as well as by domestic political interests. Still, the religious dimension contributes to dramatizing the issues and provides material for symbolic statements, showing how faith matters are intertwined with national cultures. The main opposition to Viktor Orbán comes from the Nordic and Benelux countries. The Protestant heritage of the Nordic countries is fused with national identity and distrustful of a self-assertive Catholic Europe, while their level of secularization works against a strong affirmation of religion in both public and private realms. They also share with the Benelux member states a logic of peaceful accommodation between politics and religion that is not congruent with a messianic use of religion. Other parties in countries with a strong history of separation between politics and religion, such as France, struggle to come to terms with the rhetoric of Orbán, even if they are reluctant to stigmatize a political ally at the EP. Beyond national sensitivities, what is at stake is the Christian democratic identity as well as the Christian identity of Europe. Viktor Orbán stated in Strasbourg during the 11 September 2018 plenary debate that he and his opponents “are thinking differently of the Christian nature of Europe”. During this event, these opponents confirmed a substantial divergence on their political identity²⁴:

“I see many incompatibilities between his [Orbán’s] words and the Christian-Democratic values on which the EPP family is based.”

(Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, EPP/LU)

“You [Mr Orbán’s] do not represent Helmut Kohl’s heritage nor the salvation of Christian Democracy. [...] Rest assured, we in the EPP group are not going to give up our identity.”

(MEP Anna Maria Corazza Bildt, EPP/IT)

“Whoever continuously goes against [the] Christian-Democratic ideology and values doesn’t have a place with us.”

(Belgian CD&V leader Wouter Beke)

24. European Parliament. “The situation in Hungary (debate)”, Brussels, September 11, 2018, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+CRE+20180911+ITEM-011+DOC+XML+V0//EN>.

This battle both for the substance of Christian democracy and for the ‘soul of Europe’ is even acknowledged by competitors from other ideological families. This is best illustrated by the ALDE group chair Guy Verhofstadt (BE) criticizing the betrayal of the founding fathers’ legacy:

“I will recognise it—that does not happen often—that the European Union has been based on Christian-Democratic principles, beliefs and energy for decades. [...] [But] I want to plead to you, my Christian-Democratic colleagues, to recognise that the way Schuman looked at Christianity is in many ways exactly the opposite to the divisive, narrow and destructive actions and opinions of Mr Orbán.”

And yet, the centre-left forces never framed either their hostility to Fidesz as a secularist reaction against the resurgence of a religious discourse in politics. This shows the range and the limits of religion as a demarcation line. This confirms studies stating that religion is no more a cleavage structuring oppositions between ideological blocks, but rather a symbolic material allowing differences to be marked and leadership to be claimed within the same political family²⁵. Ongoing initiatives coming from the extreme right are part of this path of intra-political families’ fights. The stake is to secure cultural hegemony as well as ownership of the religious reference in the competition between right-wing and extreme-right forces. As an illustration, the school of political science opened in 2018 by Marion-Maréchal Le Pen aims to train future conservative elites and to advocate ‘the principles of the Christian and Greco-Roman civilization’ to gain control of values-loaded such as gay marriage or medically assisted procreation²⁶. Another initiative is the academy launched by Donald Trump’s former advisor Steve Bannon, together with Benjamin Harnwell, director of the Dignitatis Humanae Institute in Brussels, with a view to rearming intellectually and normatively rear Catholic elites and to reversing secularization in Europe²⁷.

Looking at the broader political picture, religion is present on both sides, but framed differently in the conflagration sketched by the media between two transcontinental alliances labelled ‘Europe Macronia’ and ‘Europe Orbana’. The French president Emmanuel Macron advocates a liberal Europe, both in economic and cultural terms, that may mobilize religion in various capacities: as a resource of soft identity politics; as a vicarious memory; as a part of civil society that is encouraged to contribute to the common good while respecting the prerogatives of the State. By contrast, the Hungarian prime minister refers to religion as

25. François Foret, *Religion and Politics in the European Union. The Secular Canopy* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 2015.

26. Lucie Soullier, “La visite très remarquée de la ‘retraîtée’ Marion Maréchal à Oxford”, *Le Monde*, January 23, 2019.

27. Chico Harlan, “With Support from Steve Bannon, a Medieval Monastery Could Become a Populist Training Ground”, *The Washington Post*, December 25, 2018.

a culturalist tradition to harden national and European boundaries. With much less intensity, religion also operates as a vector of differentiation between mainstream leaders in the competition to choose the leader running as the EPP candidate for the presidency of the Commission.

Religion in Intra-Party Selection of Leaders: The Race of the Spitzenkandidaten

The EPP *Spitzenkandidat* was elected after primaries opposing the Bavarian CSU (Christian Social Union) MEP Manfred Weber to Alexander Stubb (former Finnish Prime Minister and incumbent vice-president of the European Investment Bank). The former won a landslide victory in November 2018 after a campaign where religion emerged both as a characteristic feature designing a political profile for each leader and as an issue to be dealt with.

Weber constitutes a standard Christian-Democratic candidate coming from a firmly conservative and religious party and religion and defining himself as a devout Roman Catholic. On his website, Weber insists on the public outreach of private convictions:

“Religion is not only a matter of personal belief. [...] the state is based on values it cannot create itself. Politics is not created in a vacuum. Christian values guide political action.”

Still, he did not engage in a value-driven campaign. Rather, he posed as a compromise-maker. As the head of the EPP parliamentary group and guardian of its unity, he declined to give voting guidelines on the Sargentini report condemning the anti-democratic turn of Hungary, leaving a freedom of choice to his fellow MEPs. It took the anti-Juncker ad campaign launched by Fidesz that violated party loyalty to eventually lead Weber to accept sanctions against Orbán²⁸. By contrast, his opponent Alexander Stubb remained silent on his personal beliefs and belongs to the *Kokoomus* party that is not ideologically linked to Christian Democracy. Stubb advocated a cultural liberalism at odds with the conservative stances of Orbán. He has also built a strong profile on the rule of law and democratic values²⁹. His zero tolerance claim for illiberal politicians contrasted with the political realism to preserve an EPP majority in the next term. In short, each candidate illustrated a different ideological side of the EPP with divergent relation to religion. Weber was the poster boy of a traditional version of Christian democracy paying tribute to its religious roots but also taking electoral realities into account. Stubb was firmer on values but in a secular perspective. Besides, the coalition supporting each candidate showed further divisions of the EPP along

28. Florian Eder, “Manfred Weber Threatens Orbán’s Party with Expulsion from EPP”, *Politico*, March 5, 2019.

29. Paul Taylor, “Europe’s conservative (non) choice”, *Politico*, October 24, 2018

denominational lines. Stubb, the former ruler of a Protestant country, was supported mainly by Protestant Scandinavian member states who were also tougher towards Fidesz. Weber, an outspoken Catholic from Catholic Bavaria, was backed by Catholic (Austria, Croatia, Ireland) and Orthodox (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Romania) factions who were more lenient towards Fidesz by political realism or cultural and ideological affinities. Still, denominational determinism stopped where party and national interests started. The Lutheran German Chancellor Angel Merkel endorsed Weber to favour the CDU-CSU alliance in domestic politics. In a nutshell, the ‘Catholic vs Protestant’ line worked as a shifting polarity more than as a structuring cleavage.

What happened in other political groups to elect the candidates for the Commission presidency in the *Spitzenkandidat* process confirmed that religion was not a significant factor of division but could occasionally emerge as a secondary element of self-definition or disqualification of opponents. No partisan family built its message in predominantly religious or secularist terms. The most likely candidates such as extreme right forces are internally too ambivalent regarding religion to use it as a unifying topic (like the *Rassemblement National* in France that used to host both a fundamentalist Catholic minority and tenants of a tough secularism targeting Islam), and their respective national history and ideological positioning is even more diverse. As an illustration, it was not a salient subject in the dialogue between Marine Le Pen and Mateo Salvini during the campaign³⁰ beyond usual criticisms of Islam and references to Christianity in a cultural sense. Leftist forces used the spiritual references of Orbán or the excessive complacency of Weber towards Orbán on this topic as extra arguments to denounce the moral hypocrisy of their right-wing adversaries.

Finally, members of the European Council aborted the *Spitzenkandidat* process and took the decision in their own hands. The choice of Ursula von der Leyen confirms the little significance of the religious dimension. Van der Leyen belongs to the EPP but is far from being a poster lady of the Christian democratic tradition. Being a mother of seven, she acted as German federal minister for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth between 2005 and 2009 and for Labour and Social Affairs between 2009 and 2013 in a way that contrasted with the usual conservative approach of the CDU. She took measures to encourage women to have children without sacrificing their professional life like the development of childcare and parental leave. Breaking free from the mainstream triptych “Kinder, Küche, Kirche”, she was accused by the bishop of Augsburg to turn women into “machines producing children”. Her advocacy for gender equality pursued as Minister of Defense between 2013 and 2019 antagonized a large part

30. Jérôme Gautheret and Jean-Baptiste Chastand, Lucie Soullier, “Elections européennes : la rencontre Salvini-Le Pen, où comment l’extrême droite tente de peser”, *Le Monde*, April 5, 2019.

of CDU members. Her support of Merkel's policy to host refugees in 2015 and her vote in favour of gay marriage in 2017 did not improve her relationship with the most religious wing of her party³¹. In her political programme for the incoming term of the Commission presented at the European Parliament, von der Leyen confirmed her pragmatic approach and makes no reference to religion and little to values, the latter being related to rule of law, trade and soft power in external affairs³². Overall, her biography³³ suggests that the spiritual dimension plays a far lesser role in her career and political choices than for Merkel or Weber and framed her as a so-called modern critical conservative. In short, the outcome of the 2019 race for the presidency of the European Commission illustrated the inability of the Christian democratic family to impose its candidate. Power games between governments and political families have led to the induction of a leader who is not representative of the Christian democratic orthodoxy and who is unlikely to emphasize Christian values, but may provoke value-loaded controversies over a more liberal agenda.

Religion as a Policy Bone of Contention: Past, Present and Future Stakes

Besides being a factor influencing political attitudes and electoral behaviours (Section I), and colouring party cleavages (Section II), religion is also a policy issue. As such, it is less an object of direct public action for the EU (which has no competencies on this matter) than a subdued component in many policy fields, with a resilient potential to stir controversies. The purpose of the last section of the article is to offer non-exhaustive illustrations of the occurrences and effects of religion on some political priorities on the agenda of the term 2019-2024. According to the Commission, the action of the EU in the next five years should focus on five main dimensions to make Europe more protective (internal security, defence, migration); competitive (single market, research and innovation, digital economy, equitable labour market); fair (social rights, inclusion, rule of law, taxation, healthcare); sustainable (climate change, green growth, energy); and influential (multilateralism, rules-based global order, EU leadership)³⁴. The agenda sponsored by the Commission is largely congruent with the Sibiu declaration

31. Thomas Wieder, "Ursula von der Leyen, une pro-européenne au bilan controversé en Allemagne", *Le Monde*, July 17, 2019.

32. Ursula Von der Leyen "A Union that strives for more. My agenda for Europe. Political guidelines for the next European Commission term 2019-2024", European Commission, 2019, 14-17, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20190716RES57231/20190716RES57231.pdf>.

33. Ulrike Demmer and Daniel Goffart, *Kanzlerin der Reserve: Der Aufstieg der Ursula von der Leyen* (Berlin, Berlin Verlag), 2015.

34. European Commission, "Commission's contribution to the EU's next strategic agenda for 2019-2024", April 30, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/commissions-contribution-eus-next-strategic-agenda-2019-2024-2019-apr-30_en.

issued by the European Council³⁵ in which European leaders commit themselves in the near future to keep European unity and solidarity; to fight for democracy, rule of law and the European way of life; to deliver outcomes matching the expectations of citizens; to ensure social, economic and digital equity; to make the EU able to both convince and constrain on the global stage; to act efficiently for the preservation of the climate and of the environment. Using these prospective documents as broad guidelines, we offer some case studies of the way religion can come into play in the EP in five domains: identity and memory politics (for unity and inclusion); counter-radicalization (for security and protection); economic and social policies (for competitiveness and equity); morality politics and fundamental rights (for fairness and European values).

Identity and memory politics relate to the 1990s' founding debate about references to God or Europe's Christian heritage in the EU Treaties. In this regard, the EP has been both a chamber of echo for actors willing to advocate the acknowledgment of the Union's Christian roots; and a moderating device able to keep compromise possible between all political groups. A good illustration of this double function is offered by Hans-Gert Pöttering: as the president of the EPP, he advocated for a reference to Europe's Christian heritage in the Constitutional Treaty; when he became president of the EP in 2007, his discourse became much more restricted so as to avoid antagonizing reluctant political groups³⁶. References to the Christian heritage have multiplied both in national and European politics and come from almost all party families on a variety of policy domains ranging from asylum to welfare or culture. Arguably, they create more controversies than unity but they are instrumental to affirm specificities in party competition or to claim recognition in the public sphere without establishing sustainable cleavages.

In *security matters* through the example of *counter-radicalization*, the EP sticks to its traditional dual role as the guardian of human rights and as the representative assembly voicing citizens' concerns regarding terrorism. Its contribution to the EU strategy against terrorism, launched in 2005 and revised in 2008 and 2014, reflects these two objectives by balancing the rule of law and emergency measures. The approach of the EP is to repress and prevent violence claiming a religious inspiration while dealing as little as possible directly with religion. In the work of the Special Committee on Terrorism (TERR), set upon July 6, 2017³⁷, religion figures more as a root *cause* of radicalization rather than as an element

35. European Council, "Sibiu Declaration", press release, May 9, 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/fr/press/press-releases/2019/05/09/the-sibiu-declaration/>.

36. Pascal Fontaine, *Voyage to the Heart of Europe 1953-2009. A History of the Christian-Democratic Group and the Group of the European People's Party in the European Parliament* (Brussels: Racine, 2010).

37. European Parliament, "Special committee to tackle deficiencies in the fight against terrorism", July 6, 2017, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20170629IPR78658/special-committee-to-tackle-deficiencies-in-the-fight-against-terrorism>.

of *counter* radicalization. Still, member states are asked to encourage and tolerate only the practices of Islam that are in full accordance with EU values³⁸. The EP is expected to maintain these two functions of legal watchdog and tribune for citizens' fears in the incoming term.

Religious influences are sometimes nested in materialistic economic and social issues supposedly led by sheer interests. Concerned for the protection of their rural electorate and the disappearance of the "parish civilization"³⁹ that used to be their political constituency, Christian Democrats considered the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) as a top priority at the end of the 1950s. However, their progressive conversion to economic liberalism and the necessity to adapt the costly CAP to the market and to budgetary restrictions led them to be less adamant in the defence of this sector of EU public action⁴⁰ and the spiritual dimension is nowadays largely absent from the policy choices of the EPP to this regard. *Monetary and budgetary policies* can also be endowed with a religious dimension. It may be instrumental, like in Romania, where priests are enrolled to promote a euro switchover plan in 2024 in order to reach parts of the population that governmental communication does not touch and to give a moral authority to the reform⁴¹. It may be substantial when currency stability and debt reduction is framed as a part of social justice under God and as a moral duty towards future generations⁴². The Greek crisis has been frequently interpreted along contradictory theological lines: – as a punishment from God for the turpitudes of mismanagement, thus calling for repentance⁴³; as a moral obligation to rebel against austerity that damaged human dignity by cutting in welfare and social aids; as a clash of cultures between a German *ordo-liberalism* rooted in Protestant ethics and an Orthodox failure to build a modern functional state and to give precedence to the world of family and social solidarity⁴⁴. Looking at the broader picture, the welfare reforms advocated by the European Commission on behalf of competitiveness and making the individual accountable for his/her success are perceived as inspired by a Protestant thought that contrasts with the

38. European Parliament, "Draft report on findings and recommendations of the Special Committee on Terrorism" PE 621.073v01-00–TERR_PR(2018)621073, June 21, 2018, § 15, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/terr/draft-reports.html>.

39. Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Catholicisme, la fin d'un monde* (Paris: Bayard, 2003).

40. Pascal Fontaine. *Voyage to the Heart of Europe 1953-2009. A History of the Christian-Democratic Group and the Group of the European People's Party in the European Parliament* (Brussels: Racine, 2010), 201-206.

41. Christian Gherasim, "Romania enlists priests to promote euro switchover plan", February 11, 2019, <https://euobserver.com/economic/144113>.

42. Fontaine, *Voyage to the Heart of Europe 1953-2009...*, 91.

43. Efstathios Kessareas, "The Greek Debt Crisis as Theodicy: Religious Fundamentalism and Socio-Political Conservatism", *The Sociological Review* 66, no. 1 (2018): 122–137.

44. Josef Hien, "The Religious Foundations of the European Crisis", *Journal of Common Market Studies* 57, no. 2 (2017): 1–20.

traditional non-conditional assistance of Catholic and Orthodox societies⁴⁵. The European social agenda is not expected to take another direction in the years to come⁴⁶. Meanwhile, the retreat of the state may open opportunities for religious actors to reinforce their role in welfare and social assistance.

Fundamental rights and morality politics are two cases regarding the interferences of religion in the claim of the EU to stand for fairness in domestic and international politics and to advocate European values. *Morality policies* refer to public issues involving moral choices and framed by notions of good and evil—thus frequently impregnated by religious norms. They often (though not exclusively) relate to life and death matters (abortion, euthanasia), sexuality (prostitution, same-sex marriage) or individual liberty (gun control, drug consumption)⁴⁷. They also take on an ‘either/or’ outlook hampering the definition of compromises⁴⁸. At the supranational level, capitalizing on morality issues may allow raising citizens’ interest and to reach out an electorate otherwise indifferent to EU affairs. However, their politicization does not come without risks: it challenges ideological and party boundaries and makes coalition- and consensus-building difficult, thus endangering the delicate European decision-making mechanisms. They can also (re)vitalize divisions between religious and secular forces, between denominations or between member states with different traditions to relate politics to religion⁴⁹. What follows sheds light on different strands of morality issues—the family, immigration and climate change—and illuminates the opportunities and constraints they set.

Family, gender and sexual issues—e.g., abortion, same-sex marriage, surrogacy, women’s rights—never took a central stage during European election campaigns since Member States remain sovereign to legislate in the field. The EU truly debates about the voluntary interruption of pregnancy or LGBT rights, but never adopts binding texts upon which capitals are bound to act. The politicization of family issues rather serves symbolic purposes, enabling political entrepreneurs

45. Lina Molokotos-Liederman, Anders Bäckström and Grace Davie, eds., *Religion and welfare in Europe: gendered and minority perspectives* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2017). ; Anders Bäckström Anders and Grace Davie, “A Preliminary Conclusion: Gathering the Threads and Moving On”, in *Welfare and Religion in 21st Century Europe*, eds. Anders Bäckström, Grace Davie, Ninna Edgardh and Per Petterson (Farnham: Ashgate 2010), 183–198; Kees Van Kersbergen, Philip Manow, eds. “Religion and the Western Welfare State—The Theoretical Context”, in *Religion, Class Coalitions and Welfare States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–38.

46. Amandine Crespy, *L’Europe sociale. Acteurs, politiques, débats* (Bruxelles : Éditions de l’Université de Bruxelles), 2019.

47. Emma Budde, Stephan Heichel, Steffen Hurka and Christoph Knill, “Partisan effects in morality policy making”, *European Journal of Political Research* 57, no. 2 (2018): 427–449.

48. Luca Ozzano, Alberta Giorgi, *European Culture Wars and the Italian Case. Which Side Are You?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 166.

49. Emma Budde, Christoph Knill, Xavier Fernández Marín and Caroline Preidel, “A matter of timing: The religious factor and morality policies”, *Governance*, no. 31 (2018): 45–63.

to acquire visibility and to (re)assert a partisan, national or religious identity⁵⁰. During the term 2014-2019, the progressive Estrela report on sexual and reproductive health and rights failed to be adopted in plenary session due to the aggregation of various conservative oppositions. Concomitantly, European citizens' initiative 'One of Us,' which opposed EU-funded embryo-destructive activities with an underlying pro-life agenda, caught much public attention between 2012 and 2014. The Hungarian crisis similarly opened a political frontline regarding family issues. Budapest was criticized to have used European funds to support a national anti-abortion campaign through the supranational employment and social solidarity programme PROGRESS⁵¹.

Immigration is a usual carrier for the revival of controversies regarding the coexistence of different faiths. The topic has been hijacked by political entrepreneurs dramatizing a clash of civilizations at and within European borders. Orbán accuses Brussels, Berlin and Paris to facilitate the 'advance of Islam at the expense of Christianity'⁵². Conversely, he is reproached with ignoring Christian values when he pretended to select migrants on the basis of their denominational belonging or when he refused to care for them⁵³. The pope himself targeted him, declaring that "populism is evil"⁵⁴ and that "caring for migrants and the poor is just as important as preventing abortion"⁵⁵. Fidesz was then evidence of competitive interpretation of Christian values and exemplified the choice to place Christendom above Christianity⁵⁶ and to instrumentalize a Christian identity reduced to a symbolic resource hollowed from its religious content.

Merkel advocated Christian values in another sense when she admonished her fellow German citizens to live up to their Christian ethics by helping migrants. Still, her political purpose was largely secular, namely to keep them closer to their homes and in any case away from Europe. Overall, scholars support the idea to go beyond religiously-loaded readings of the refugees' crisis so as to privilege secular notions of solidarity between human beings⁵⁷.

50. Emilie Mondo, "European Culture Wars? Abortion and Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research (1998-2015)", PhD diss., (Université libre de Bruxelles, 2018).

51. Euractiv, "EU funds used for Hungarian anti-abortion campaign" *Euractiv*, June 17, 2011, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/eu-funds-used-for-hungarian-anti-abortion-campaign/>.

52. Daniel Kahlili-Tari, "Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán vows to create 'Christian homeland' on eve of election". *The Independent*, April 7, 2018.

53. Giulio Ercolessi, "The Sargentini Report: A Christian Dilemma", *Euractiv*, September 11, 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/freedom-of-thought/opinion/the-sargentini-report-a-christian-dilemma>.

54. Frank Furedi. *Populism and the European Culture Wars. The Conflict of Values between Hungary and the EU* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).

55. Julie Zauzmer, "Pope Francis's new major document: Caring for migrants and the poor is just as important as preventing abortion", *The Washington Post*, April 9, 2018.

56. Olivier Roy, "Beyond Populism: The Conservative Right, the Courts, the Churches and the Concept of a Christian Europe", in *Saving the People. How Populists Hijack Religion*, eds. Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell and Olivier Roy (London: Hurst & Company, 2016), 85-201, 186.

57. Ibid.

Eventually, *climate change* is likely to feature among MEPs' top priorities in the incoming term. Indeed, the defection of the United States from the international climate regime (as settled by the 2015 Paris Agreement) is prompting the Union to strengthen its leadership role in the protection of the environment⁵⁸. Yet, climate change politics is 'irreducibly cultural' and raises 'unavoidable ethical questions'. As such, this issue opens a new window of opportunity for faith-based organizations to (re)endorse a public role in (secular) societies. Scientists and politicians recognize the ability of religious actors to frame problems and disseminate argumentation at the service of a public good that transcends national boundaries. Climate change is a topic regularly discussed in the dialogue between European and religious institutions⁵⁹. The European Parliamentary Research Service itself describes FBOs as important partners for the EU's future actions in the field⁶⁰.

Actually, the world's churches have quickly seized on the environmental crisis and taken position on the need for energy transition⁶¹. Most of them emphasize the sacredness of nature and care for the destiny of the Earth, as attested by the increasing number of official theological statements advocating environment-friendly behaviours. Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'* on ecology, for example, highlights the social and ethical issues caused by climate change, including mass migration and famine⁶². In the same year, the Jewish community published the *Rabbinic Letter on the Climate Crisis*, while Islamic scholars from twenty countries issued the *Islamic Declaration on Climate Change* and called on Muslims to tackle global warming through "a rapid phase-out of fossil fuels and a switch to renewable energy"⁶³. These 'ecological spiritualities'⁶⁴ – i.e., the relationship between religion and ecology – have been the object of academic research from the late 1980s onwards. Scholars have mainly investigated the impact of religiosity on the environmental attitudes and policy decisions of citizens or elected officials. Some have demonstrated a negative relationship between conservative religiosity and environmental concerns; others have found that religion

58. Stephen Minas and Vassilis Ntousas, eds., "Introduction. EU Climate Diplomacy in a Time of Disruption", in *EU Climate Diplomacy. Politics, Law and Negotiations* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 4.

59. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/fr/be-heard/religious-and-non-confessional-dialogue>.

60. Philippe Perchoc, "Religion and the EU's external policies. Increasing engagement", *EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service – In-depth analysis*, December 2017, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/614612/EPRS_IDA\(2017\)614612_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/614612/EPRS_IDA(2017)614612_EN.pdf).

61. Cristián Parker, "Climate change, energy transition and religions", *Social Compass* 62, no. 3 (2015): 283–295, 284.

62. Elisabetta Povoledo, "At Vatican, 'Tenets of Faith' Seen as Crucial in Climate Change Effort", *The New York Times*, November 4, 2017.

63. Kalina Oroschakoff, "Muslims get emission religion" *Politico*, August 18, 2015.

64. Willis Jenkins, Evan Berry, Luke Kreider, 2018. "Religion and Climate Change", *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, no. 43 (2018): 85–108.

may sustain pro-environmental attitudes as well⁶⁵. More recently, students have focused on the partisan politics of climate change and shown that it roughly confirms the ‘left vs right’ pattern—although, unlike in the United States, no European political party opposes in principle the fight against climate change⁶⁶. That being said, the issue does not capture election campaigns either: on the one hand, apart from the Green parties, most mainstream parties do not exclusively capitalize on the protection of the environment in their respective manifestos; on the other hand, voters are traditionally more concerned with the topics of health, education, employment or immigration⁶⁷.

Conclusion

This paper shed light on the salience, forms and effects of religion as a resilient force in European elections and in the European Parliament and offers a perspective of what might happen in this regard during the 2019-2024 legislature. A first section cast light on citizens’ political behaviour, and provided sociological accounts as to how religion influences both attitudes towards EU membership and electoral choices. It does no longer delineate cleavages structuring individual and collective political choices, but remains a significant influence in interaction with (and secondary to) other factors. A second section focused on the European People’s Party as a showcase of the presence of religion in party politics and on competing interpretations of religion to claim leadership in redefining the core and boundaries of this political family. We showed that secularization of the decline of Christian Democracy blurs the institutionalization of religion in power games and, meanwhile, makes possible its dissemination as a symbolic resource across ideological boundaries. Religious identities are still periodically mobilized as normative instrumental resources; both the Hungarian rule of law crisis and the EPP’s *Spitzenkandidaten* race offered religious occurrences oscillating between messianic ambitions and self-serving political strategies. A third and last section adopted a thematic perspective overseeing past, present and future cultural clashes on identity and memory politics; security and counter-radicalization; the economy and the welfare state; fundamental rights; morality politics, especially regarding the family, immigration and climate change. The EU seldom rules on so-called morality issues and episodic religiously motivated feuds do not significantly alter existing political and legal frameworks. Nevertheless, they are

65. Darren E. Sherkat and Christopher G. Ellison, “Structuring the Religion-Environment Connection: Identifying Religious Influences on Environmental Concern and Activism”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46, no. 1 (2007): 71–85.

66. Robert Ladrech, “Party Politics and EU Climate Policy”, in *EU Climate Diplomacy. Politics, Law and Negotiations*, eds. S. Minas and V. Ntousas (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 13–21, 16.

67. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

bound to revitalize the electoral appeal of religion as a cultural marker of Europe's identity, specificity and unity. In this process, the use of religion is always clearly subordinated to tactical imperatives and ranges from a civilizational vision to an identity marker, a value invoked in times of crisis or mnemonic trace (these different statuses overlapping over time). The 2019 EU elections and the 2019-2024 term are unlikely to articulate around confessional stakes *per se* but cannot escape the religious coloration of contemporary divides either.

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to make sense of the resurgence of religion on the political agenda of a secularizing Europe. Here, the focus is placed on the European Union (EU). The religious factor is considered alternatively as an influence on political attitudes and behaviours; as an ideological and party component; and as a controversial policy stake. Thus, we analyse the effects of the religious factor in past European elections as an element framing the perception of European integration and the vote. We then document the crisis affecting the Christian-Democratic family incarnated by the European People's Party (EPP) and competing narratives on religion aimed at claiming leadership in the redefining the core ideology and boundaries of this political family. Two cases studies are developed: The 'Hungarian crisis' and identity politics promoted by Viktor Orban; and the Spitzenkandidaten process to select the EPP candidate running for the presidency of the European Commission. We finally study the treatment of religion as a policy issue within the European Parliament (EP) and discuss its potential to become a bone of contention in the 2019-2024 legislature.

Keywords

European Union, European Parliament, European elections, religion, Christian democracy, European People's Party

Résumé

L'objectif de cet article est de mieux saisir la résurgence de la religion dans l'agenda politique d'une Europe laïque. L'accent est placé ici sur l'Union européenne (UE). Le facteur religieux est envisagé tour à tour comme un facteur d'influence sur les attitudes et les comportements politiques, comme une composante idéologique et partisane, et en tant qu'enjeu politique controversé. Nous analysons ainsi les effets du facteur religieux lors des précédentes élections européennes en tant qu'élément cadrant la perception de l'intégration européenne ainsi que le vote. Nous documentons ensuite la crise qui affecte la famille démocrate-chrétienne incarnée par le Parti populaire européen (PPE) et les récits concurrents sur la religion visant à revendiquer le leadership dans la redéfinition de l'idéologie centrale et des démarcations de cette famille politique. Deux études de cas sont développées : la « crise hongroise » et la politique identitaire promue par Viktor Orban ; et le processus Spitzenkandidaten destiné à sélectionner le candidat du PPE briguant la présidence de la Commission européenne. Enfin, nous étudions le traitement de la religion comme une question politique au sein du Parlement européen (PE), et l'envisagerons aussi en tant qu'éventuelle pomme de discorde pour la législature 2019-2024.

Mots-clés

Union européenne, Parlement européen, élections européennes, religion, démocratie chrétienne, Parti populaire européen